

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Parent-child contact problems: Family violence and parental alienating behaviors either/or, neither/nor, both/and, one in the same?

Matthew Sullivan¹ | Marsha Pruett²  | Janet Johnston³

¹Santa Cruz, California, USA

²Social Work Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA

³San Jose State University, San Jose, California, USA

Correspondence

Matthew Sullivan, Private Practice, Santa Cruz, California, USA.

Email: sullypsych@hushmail.com

Abstract

This article argues that in order to intervene effectively and ethically with children who are manifesting Parent-child contact problems (PCCPs) after parental separation, we begin by being mindful of what is normal about divorce transitions and use developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive analysis to rule out children's common transitory reactions. It is then important to concurrently assess for both family violence (FV) and severe parental alienating behavior (PAB) on the part of both parents, which can co-occur in some cases. The article asserts that it is also important to consider common problematic parenting responses that may potentiate the PCCP but not necessarily rise to the level of abuse. FV is defined as a child's direct experience of physical, sexual, or psychological maltreatment and indirect exposure to sibling abuse and/or to intimate partner violence (IPV). PAB is defined as an ongoing pattern of unwarranted negative messages on the part of one parent that conveys that the child's other parent is disinterested, irrelevant, dangerous, and not to be trusted. Any one or all of these factors may contribute to a child's strident negativity and sustained rejection of one parent, these being defining features of a PCCP. This article proposes ethical principles and priorities for decision-making in these cases, considering the growing social science controversy about assessment and intervention for PCCPs. It concludes with

an analysis of recent, contrasting policy approaches to PCCPs (e.g., Kayden's Law and the Joint Statement of the AFCC and NCJFCJ) and their potential impact on family justice system professionals and the families they serve.

KEYWORDS

domestic violence, intimate partner violence, Kayden's law, parental alienating behaviors, parental alienation, parent-child contact problems

Key points for the family court community

- This article provides more precision in defining Parent-child contact problems, Family Violence, Parental Alienation, and Parental alienating behaviors.
- This article asserts that in addition to forms of violence in families such as sexual and physical abuse and IPV, severe PABs represent a form of FV akin to psychological maltreatment.
- We offer a framework that prioritizes the safety of child and victim parents, with a focus on safety in the face of parental conduct that is damaging, possibly abusive, not protective.
- Two recent public policy approaches to addressing Parent-child contact problems, Kayden's Law and the NCJFCJ/AFCC's joint statement are discussed.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Matthew J. Sullivan was the President of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) international organization from 2019 to 2020. He received the Tim Salus presidential award from the AFCC in 2023. He served on the American Psychological Association Ethics Committee from 2016 to 2018. He currently serves on the editorial board of the *Family Court Review*. He is the co-founder of Overcoming Barriers, Inc., which is a non-profit organization that has developed a variety of professional training programs to intervene with parent-child contact problems. For more information, his website is sullydoc.com

sullydoc.com.



Marsha Pruett is the Maconda Brown O'Connor Professor at Smith College School for Social Work and adjunct Professor in psychology. She has been in practice for over 30 years and has published numerous articles, books, and curricula on topics pertaining to couple relationships before and after divorce, father involvement, dispute resolution programs and interventions, young children and overnights, and child outcomes during life transitions. She has co-authored *Your Divorce Advisor: A Psychologist and Attorney Lead You through the Legal and Emotional Landscape of Divorce* (Fireside) and *Partnership Parenting* (Perseus).

She provides interdisciplinary training to mental health and legal professionals.



Janet R. Johnston is now professor emeritus, Department of Justice Studies, San Jose State University. Formerly she was consulting associate professor of Sociology at Stanford University and research director at the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition. Her work draws attention to the construction of negative stories that can become embedded as belief systems, expectation-states and behavioral scripts of children, parents and extended community of highly conflicted, custody-litigating cases where domestic violence, parental abduction and parental alienation are alleged.