

COPARENTING THROUGH CONFLICT: AN EVALUATION OF AN INTERVENTION  
FOR HIGH-CONFLICT COURT-CONNECTED FAMILY SYSTEMS

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## DEDICATION

This project has been demanding, long, messy, and tiring, but with a huge reward at the end—much like labor. Thus, I dedicate this endeavor to my children, whose unwavering encouragement, patience, and willingness to support my academic endeavors have pushed me to learn, grow, and develop myself in ways that I would not have done if it were not for my desire to set a good example for them.

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## ABSTRACT

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### COPARENTING THROUGH CONFLICT: AN EVALUATION OF AN INTERVENTION FOR HIGH-CONFLICT COURT-CONNECTED FAMILY SYSTEMS

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Over the last decade, researchers have investigated the impact of high-conflict coparenting dynamics on children living in dual-household family systems. Subsequently, a large body of evidence has demonstrated that children exposed to ongoing interparental conflict are at an increased risk of experiencing developmental difficulties, including emotional and behavioral maladjustment, and reduced academic achievement (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Becher et al., 2019; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). In an effort to provide empirical support for an intervention designed for high-conflict families, the purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of parents who completed the in-person New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce (NWFF) program. The NWFF program is designed to teach dual-household parents the skills they need to protect their children from the adverse effects of interparental conflict while at the same time preserving the parents' and court's resources (Eddy, 2009a). An interpretive phenomenological qualitative research design was used, implementing an emergent and exploratory focus. Three main themes and twelve subthemes were identified: (1) Family Relationships (Improving the Coparenting Relationship and Improving the Parent-Child Relationship), (2) What Parents Found Helpful (Individual Meetings, Homework Assignments, Practitioner Support, Joint Parent Session, and Joint Parent-Child Sessions), and (3) Suggestions for Program Improvement (Extend Program Length, Expand Program Content, Require Participation of Both Parents and Collaboration with Other Professionals).

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **High-Conflict Coparenting**

In the United States, one in four parents caring for children under 18 is currently unmarried (Livingston, 2018). Driven largely by an increase in non-marital births and a decline in the marriage rate, this marks a significant shift from parenting arrangements a half-century ago, when less than 7% of dependent children lived with unmarried parents (Livingston, 2018). These numbers reflect a growing trend in diverse family formations, including non-marital childbearing, single parenthood, divorce, remarriage, and blended families (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). This results in approximately 8 million children in the U.S. spending a portion of their childhood being cared for by an unmarried/single parent, stepparent, or extended family member (Champion & Trane, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The literature has consistently demonstrated that, compared to children in nuclear families, children transitioning between homes with multiple caregivers are at an increased risk for harmful outcomes associated with unstable domestic arrangements, inconsistent care (Karberg & Cabrera, 2020a, 2020b; Lang & Zagorsky, 2001), and dysfunctional caregiver practices (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Amato & Keith, 1991; Becher et al., 2019; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Davies et al., 2015; Deutsch et al., 2017; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Emery, 1999; Ferraro et al., 2016; Grych, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston et al., 2009; Modecki et al., 2014; Sandler et al., 2008; Sandler et al., 2013; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). Taking into consideration how fluid the U.S. family has become, as well as the substantial number of children spending a portion of their childhood living with non-cohabiting parents, finding effective and practical ways to help adult caregivers establish healthy relationships has been identified as a community investment with far-reaching

implications for society (Babb & Moran, 2019; Barlow & Coren, 2018; Tesler, 2017). The focus of the present study is on dual-household families with children under the age of 18 who are experiencing high conflict due to separation, divorce, or the breakdown of an intimate relationship. Thus, the terms *separation* and *divorce* will be used interchangeably throughout to describe the social transitions parents must make when there is a decision to no longer be romantically connected.

For families who are moving from a two-parent household to a single-parent home, the emotional and circumstantial changes can be stressful for parents and their children (Amato, 2000; deLusé & Braver, 2015). For many separating or divorcing couples, interparental conflict may precede the physical separation, with conflict intensifying as the former couple begins to emotionally disengage and move forward with leading separate lives (Bala & Slabech, 2019; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Studies show that approximately 40% of divorcing parents will experience moderate to intense anger as they adapt to new domestic arrangements, roles, responsibilities, and the breakdown of the intimate relationship (Johnston et al., 2009). During this period of readjustment, preoccupation with financial matters and parenting time schedules can interfere with effective parenting practices, creating stressors for the children that have been shown to lead to emotional and behavioral problems (Gryczkowski et al., 2010; Laurin et al., 2015; Xerxa et al., 2020). Fortunately, family stabilization for 75-80% of divorcing couples will occur within 2 to 3 years (Cancian et al., 2014; Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Johnston et al., 2009; Kelly, 2012; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The coparenting relationship in *these* family systems may be characterized by parents who can set aside their individual differences to focus on raising their children in a cooperative manner. This collaborative binuclear family system is often described in the divorce literature as “protective,” a coparenting

dynamic shown to prevent or minimize adjustment problems in children who transition between more than one home (O'Hara et al., 2021).

In contrast to the families that successfully transition through the breakdown of a romantic relationship with minimal disruption, there is an estimated 10-15% of couples with children who experience ongoing difficulties well beyond the time expected for them to resolve their disagreements (Polak & Saini, 2019). For this small subset of habitually conflicted parents, their inability to communicate about and cooperate over the care of their children will overshadow the entire formative years of their children's childhoods (Johnston et al., 2009). This category of families is referenced in the literature as *high-conflict*, a term that refers to a broad range of dysfunctional family dynamics characterized by anger, hostility, ineffective communication, poor problem-solving, and high rates of litigation, all of which create stressors for parents and their children (Amato, 2001; Goodman et al., 2004; Kelly, 2000, 2012; Kelly & Emery, 2003). For this subset of high-conflict families, there is an additional risk of exposure to family violence—the most destructive form of conflict—which may include partner-to-partner and parent-to-child violence (Rowlands, 2020). However, for the purpose of this paper, interparental conflict is distinguished from domestic violence, the latter of which refers to physical aggression between parents, although both forms of conflict are closely related to adjustment problems for children (Telman et al., 2016).

For high-conflict separating or divorced parents, their ongoing emotional distress may prevent them from seeing the harm their conflict has on their children's emotional and developmental well-being. These conflicted caregivers may struggle to distinguish between parental attitudes/feelings associated with an unsatisfactory marital relationship and the children's attitudes/feelings about the parent-child relationship, a dysfunctional dynamic that

could potentially draw the children into the interparental conflict. Family systems theorists describe this pattern of emotional functioning as “triangulation” (Bowen, 1978). Triangulated children are consistently identified in the divorce literature as the most at risk for adverse emotional outcomes stemming from undifferentiated relationship dynamics and problematic parenting practices (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Johnston et al., 2009). For triangulated children, the chronic and intense conflict between their parents has been associated with adverse outcomes that may reach far into adulthood (Ahrons, 2007; Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Xerxa et al., 2020). This correlation is empirically supported by numerous studies indicating that children from low-conflict divorced homes demonstrate better functioning and overall adjustment than children from intact families characterized by intense conflict (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Buehler et al., 1997; Coleman & Glenn, 2010; Cummings et al., 2012; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Sandler et al., 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although high-conflict cases are rare, there has been an indisputable increase in the reported number of bitterly contested family law cases within the last decade (Fidler & Bala, 2020). For these families, the dynamics associated with high-conflict coparenting are frequently all-consuming for the parents, the children, and the professionals tasked with providing them with services (Greenberg, 2019). Because of the complex and diverse issues associated with high-conflict cases, the dispute resolution process may be inordinately expensive, time-consuming, and burdensome, with some legal matters being adjudicated more than once (Chase & Hora, 2009). It stands to note that in nearly every separation or divorce case, the parties are likely to move at different paces depending on their ability and readiness to move through divorce-related transitions (Rosenfield et al., 2019). Consequently, resolving their issues may



become increasingly challenging as divorce, persistent interparental conflict, and legal processes become further entangled. Unfortunately, by the time legal matters are concluded, although one party may have “won” in the courtroom, the relational damage may be so extensive that repair becomes nearly, if not at all, impossible (Greenberg, 2019). Because non-cohabiting parents will be linked indefinitely as an extended family long after the challenges associated with parenting their minor children are over, family scientists and legal scholars agree that an adversarial win-lose approach is not the best process for the constructive resolution of disagreements for divorced couples with children (Bala & Slabech, 2019; Tesler, 2017). Yet, ironically, family law matters, which require the expertise of professionals with extensive training on a wide range of divorce-related issues that impact families, rely on a court system that uses methods and principles adversative to the health of families and society (Tesler, 2017). Within this complicated backdrop of financial, emotional, relational, and legal issues, professionals select interventions designed to improve the circumstances of families with children struggling to restructure due to divorce.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the encouraging evidence regarding the effectiveness of intervention programs for divorcing parents (Moran et al., 2019), developing programs specifically for families experiencing inordinate levels of conflict appears warranted since there is always new knowledge to be gained that can be used to improve the delivery and quality of professional services. By beginning with the family’s self-identified needs rather than with the legal system’s normative response, an improved understanding of families mandated to participate in dispute resolution services can provide knowledge for not only program efficacy but also a broader scale of social justice reform.

From the perspective of prevention science, parenting-focused curriculums that are empirically based have been shown to demonstrate the most impact (O'Hara et al., 2021). However, matching resources to coparenting and family treatment needs can be a dynamic and complex process. Intervening professionals may have little time to investigate a program's suitability or gather information about a particular program's effectiveness. Thus, the field would benefit by better informing providers about the available coparenting and family-focused resources for court-involved families, particularly for families who struggle with constructive conflict resolution.

In support of the complex and diverse needs of these families and in consideration of the mix of professional services that might best meet those needs, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to increase knowledge and gain an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of the New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce (NWFF) program as reported to be meaningful from the perspectives of the participating parents. The study's results can help to improve understanding of what high-conflict dual-household parents perceive to be helpful or unhelpful about the NWFF program's ability to prevent or remediate conflict in family relationships, specifically between the coparenting and parent-child relationships. This was accomplished through an in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews that were examined for thematic consistencies.

### **Significance of the Study**

Relationship dissolution can quickly become complicated when individuals do not have the necessary communication and behavioral skills to effectively resolve their disputes. Although it is not unusual for divorcing spouses to have different views about what post-divorce life should look like, for parents with minor children, an inability to successfully resolve issues of

custody (decision-making) and access (parenting time) can rapidly become the focus of intensely debated disagreements (Bailey et al., 2020). Given the risk of a badly managed divorce on the children's developmental health, the evaluation and improvement of interventions designed for parents raising children between two homes is a social investment with benefits that extend far beyond one individual family system (Babb & Moran, 2019). The significance of this perspective is supported by seasoned collaborative law attorney Pauline Tesler (2017), who emphasizes that our society is, in fact, “an invisible stakeholder in every divorce” (p. 39) as the process of divorce produces outcomes that impact public health, the economy, the workplace, community engagement, and the rearing of the next generation. With many states already facing shrinking budgets and insufficient court staff, providing quality professional services to transitioning court-involved families is a societal imperative (Tesler, 2017). This approach supports the fundamental idea that families, however diversely defined, are the foundation on which our society exists and flourishes (Babb & Moran, 2017). According to Folbre (2001), parents who raise happy, well-adjusted, and successful children provide advantages not only to the family system but also to remunerations that trickle down to positively advance societal well-being: employers benefit from industrious employees, society benefits from the enjoyment of law-abiding citizens, and the elderly reap benefits from Social Security taxes paid by young adults. It follows from this way of thinking, then, that effective interventions for divorcing families with children must be provided to support healthy ways of conflict resolution to minimize divorce-related difficulties for children. This viewpoint is supported by extensive research indicating that children exposed to persistent interparental conflict are at an increased risk for developmental disruptions and adverse emotional and behavioral outcomes (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Becher et al., 2019; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Grych, 2005; Moran et al., 2019).

Fortunately, previous literature indicates that a strong coparenting alliance (Becher et al., 2019; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), as demonstrated by more robust coparenting practices, may provide protection from or prevent some of these negative outcomes (Becher et al., 2019; Sandler et al., 2013).

### **Program Description**

As used here, a parent divorce education intervention is defined as an organized program designed to provide non-cohabiting or divorced parents with the psychoeducational knowledge and skills training required to promote their children's adjustment and developmental well-being. A distinction is made between a *general parenting program* that covers a broad range of parenting matters and a *coparenting education program* that typically focuses on coparenting issues stemming from parental separation or divorce (Moran et al., 2019). Falling under the latter category, the program that was investigated was the NWFF skills-based family-focused intervention, with its impact on minimizing conflict in the coparenting relationship being of particular interest. According to the program developer, Bill Eddy (2009a), the NWFF program is a structured method appropriate for addressing the growing problem of high-conflict litigants in the family court system, including families with allegations of child abuse, alienating behaviors, domestic violence, and substance abuse. The initial emphasis is on teaching conflict-reducing skills to the parents, identified by Eddy (2009b) as flexible thinking, managed emotions, moderate behaviors and checking yourself" (p. 1). The goal is to keep families out of court by empowering parents to make good decisions for themselves and their children (Eddy, 2009a). The NWFF program is in line with previous research indicating that if coparenting interventions are offered early in the divorce process, the intervention may be more effective as the participants may be less entrenched in their attitudes and positions and more receptive to

education, skills training, and redirection (Bala & Slabech, 2019; Fidler et al., 2019). Getting started with the NWFF program requires a signed agreement or court order, although parents can voluntarily agree to participate. In some instances, the presiding family court judge may mandate participation while also issuing temporary orders (e.g., child support, parenting schedule, protective orders, etc.). Granted, although the court is unable to predict which divorce cases will become high-conflict cases, the court may encourage an intervention program, such as NWFF, as a preventative tool to thwart some of the dysfunctional family dynamics that can occur when non-cohabiting parents lack the skills to effectively coparent.

The parents are the initial focus of the NWFF program. Prior to involving the children, each parent receives a minimum of six sessions of education, skills training, and coaching, where they are introduced to new skills and provided with opportunities to strengthen those skills. These sessions can occur individually or jointly, depending on the parents' abilities and willingness to participate. According to Eddy (2009a), teaching new communication and behavioral skills early in the process of divorce can help parents strengthen their decision-making abilities to avoid becoming high-conflict litigants in the courtroom. Upon the parents' successful completion of six sessions, each parent will have an opportunity to practice the new skills they have learned by teaching them to their children in parent-child sessions. The parents are coached to explain to their children how applying these skills to family relationships will help the family resolve conflict more healthily in the future. The parent-child sessions are a unique aspect of the NWFF intervention program, supported by previous literature suggesting that a systemic approach is critical when attempting to broaden the perspective of divorcing parents and their children (Greenberg et al., 2019) and that individual counseling for children with litigating parents is often unsuccessful because the issues are frequently not the children's

but rather the parents' (Eddy, 2009a). In support of this view, although the NWFF program initially targets the parents, the eventual goal is to include the children in order to help all family members learn new ways of constructive conflict resolution.

The overarching goals of the NWFF program, as presented by Eddy (2009a) in his *Professional Guidebook for Therapists, Lawyers, Judicial Officers, and Mediators*, include:

1. Immunizing separating or divorced families from becoming high-conflict litigants by teaching parents to avoid destructive behaviors, including all-or-nothing thinking, unmanaged emotions, and extreme behaviors;
2. Providing parents and their children with skills for resiliency, including flexible thinking, managed emotions, and moderate behaviors;
3. Strengthening the parents' abilities to rely less on other professionals and the courts by teaching them how to problem-solve important parenting matters;
4. Assisting the courts and other experts in assessing each parent's ability to learn new skills and constructive ways of problem-solving and
5. Offering parents an opportunity to adjust their behaviors when there are allegations of abuse or alienation before seeking a long-term court order that could restrict a parent's access to their children and require additional treatment (e.g., additional counseling, batterer's treatment, substance use treatment, etc.).

This approach is designed to reduce the adversarial influence of high-conflict coparenting dynamics long enough for the parents to learn and practice applying new skills in the coparenting and parent-child relationships (Eddy, 2009a). Although the court may still make a formal finding concerning past inappropriate coparenting behaviors, the focus is on improving future behaviors and coping abilities.

## **Theoretical Approaches to High Conflict**

Several theoretical approaches are proposed to help shed light on the various circumstances that may contribute to high-conflict divorce-related dynamics. These scientific theories will lay the groundwork for conceptualizing how families function during times of stressful transition, particularly during the separation, divorce, or breakdown of an intimate relationship involving minor children. Initially, high-conflict families are introduced through the lens of the systemic approaches of family systems theory and structural family therapy. Following, the influence of operant conditioning and social learning theories will be explored. Lastly, the polyvagal perspective is used to improve understanding of the physiological factors that impact how parents and children respond to and interact with one another during times of stressful conflict.

### **Systemic Theories**

In contrast to one single perspective, systemic approaches share numerous interrelated concepts and themes. Systemic approaches come from the view of a system as a set of interrelated components different from the sum of its parts (Broderick, 1993). Similarly, a family can be seen as an interconnected system made up of more than just its individual members. The family system forms an emotional unit comprised of individuals who share emotional bonds, experiences, and connections with one another. These principles provide a relevant theoretic complement to the foundational constructs of structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974), making both paradigms a compatible way to explore the impact of interparental conflict on family relationships.

## **Learning Theories**

Family systems and learning methodologies can be compatible when examining how learning occurs within a family system or social context. Both theories share similar perspectives of families as interrelated units that develop through a series of developmental tasks and learn through patterns of reinforcement and imitative learning (Bandura, 1971, 1977; Bandura et al., 1963; Minuchin, 1974). By understanding how learning processes operate within a system, systemic interventions can be developed to enhance learning outcomes or facilitate change in a more holistic and contextually relevant manner. A primary difference between the two approaches is that systems theorists examine behaviors primarily within the context of the nuclear family system, whereas learning theorists look to the influence of the larger environment to explain behavioral patterns. Prominent among both viewpoints is the idea that all members of a family exert reciprocal influence on each other; thus, no one member can ever be fully understood without considering the broader context of the entire family system (Cox & Paley, 1997) or the even larger framework of the environment (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Skinner, 1984). The two forms of behaviorism that can best be used to improve understanding of high-conflict behaviors in a binuclear family system are *operant conditioning* and *social learning theory*.

## **Polyvagal Theory**

Closely related to constructs associated with beliefs about human connectedness, interdependency, and learned patterns of behaviors is Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory (1995). Porges' approach is a newer theory founded on an evolutionary perspective in which behavior is viewed as adaptive if it improves survival, minimizes distress, or promotes optimal health and well-being (Porges, 2017). This viewpoint is framed through the construct of *neuroception*, a



term coined by Porges in 1995 to describe the role of the human autonomic nervous system in assessing for cues of safety or danger from within the body and the surrounding environment (Dana, 2018). In contrast to perception, which implies cognitive awareness, neuroception is a subcortical process that happens subconsciously (Porges, 2017). In other words, it is “detection without awareness” (Dana, 2018, p. 4). Neuroception underscores the concept of co-regulation, where individuals can influence each other’s nervous system through social interactions. When divorcing parents interact, their nervous systems impact each other’s emotional states.

Understanding this dynamic can help interventionists guide parents in regulating their emotions and supporting each other in challenging child-rearing moments. In support of an approach that recognizes the role of physiological regulation (e.g., ventral vagal regulation) in high-conflict behaviors, a polyvagal perspective emphasizes the importance of teaching parents and children how to move into and remain in a physiological state that supports and maintains collaborative engagement (Dana, 2018).

### **Epistemology and Researcher**

The epistemological methodology that will be used as the lens through which to view and theorize about the qualitative data is known as constructivism. This is an inductive approach to generating findings utilizing interviews and observation of natural social life (Saldaña, 2015). Using this model, the researcher carefully constructs knowledge rather than passively accumulating information. The goal is not to look for confirmations that maintain assertions but for the credibility of inference-laden observations about the social world being investigated (Saldaña, 2015).

As a licensed professional counselor supervisor (LPC-S) and certified family life educator (CFLE) who trains other clinicians in providing best practice services to court-involved

families at the local and state levels and also provides services to high-conflict separated or divorced family systems, I am professionally connected to the topic under investigation. My desire to help others coparent children in a healthier way stems from my own lived experience as a coparent who experienced firsthand the challenges associated with parenting children from binuclear homes. I readily acknowledge that the services I provide to coparents and their children, as well as my own experiences as a single parent, undoubtedly impact my view of the necessity of interventions for families transitioning due to separation or divorce. This creates a foundation of previous knowledge and a subjective connection to my topic, which will require me to set aside (i.e., “bracket”) my worldview to better understand and respect the experiences and views of the parents whom I will interview for the study. This kind of self-reflection highlights the fact that, as the researcher, I am a crucial part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon being investigated. Reflexivity conceptualized in this way is crucial for establishing the validity of descriptions of social phenomena (Schwandt, 2015). As such, the qualitative research questions for this study will be guided and developed in practical ways by *reflexivity*, a term referring to the process of critical self-reflection of my biases, theoretical predispositions, and personal views (Schwandt, 2015).

### **Research Question**

Although it is common knowledge that well-developed research questions do not always produce superior research, poorly written questions are problematic throughout all stages of a research study (Agee, 2009). For this reason, developing relevant and top-quality questions is of primary importance to this proposed research study (Tracy, 2020).

A phronetic approach will be utilized throughout this study to develop the initial questions and build new ones. Phronetic research methods encourage the elaboration of

“contextual knowledge that is interactively constructed, action-oriented, and imbued with certain values” (Tracy, 2020, p. 6). This approach encourages qualitative researchers to begin their inquiry with fundamental questions, such as: Where are we going? Who benefits and who does not? Is this study achievable? and What do I want to accomplish? (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Tracy, 2020). The questions guide exploration and can be as basic as, “What do I need to understand?” (Maxwell, 2013) or “What is going on here?” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Since the composition of divorcing families is constantly changing, contextual questions and explanations are essential elements of ongoing sensemaking (Tracy, 2020).

### **Guiding Research Question**

The research question for this study is guided by (a) the available scholarship on high-conflict family dynamics stemming from separation or divorce; (b) five key theoretical approaches: family systems, structural family therapy, operant conditioning, social learning, and polyvagal theory; and (c) the program goals of the NWFF in separation or divorce program.

The primary research question is: How do participants describe their experiences in the NWFF program?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are referenced frequently throughout this study; therefore, brief working definitions are provided. These definitions guide understanding of the various constructs associated with the high-conflict coparenting that stems from separation, divorce, or the inability of non-cohabiting parents to effectively communicate and make decisions for the best interests of their children.

### ***Boundaries***

Boundaries are the rules in a family system that define who participates and how they participate (Minuchin, 1974).

### ***Coparenting***

Coparenting is a shared activity assumed by adults jointly responsible for the children's daily care and upbringing (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

### ***Coparenting Alliance***

The coparenting alliance is the extent to which non-cohabiting parents can successfully interact with each other for the best interests of their children (Kopystynska et al., 2020; Margolin et al., 2001).

### ***Co-Regulation***

From a polyvagal perspective, co-regulation is the mutual influence of individuals' autonomic nervous systems, particularly the ventral vagal complex, which is associated with feelings of safety and social engagement (Porges, 2011, 2017, 2021).

### ***Family Structure***

The family structure is the covert set of functional demands that establishes how family members behave and interact (Minuchin, 1974).

### ***High-Conflict Coparenting***

High-conflict coparenting relationships are characterized by persistent distrust, frequent arguments, antagonistic behaviors, and the coparents' attempts to sabotage and undermine each other's respective roles within the family system (Johnston et al., 2009).

### ***New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce***

The New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce (NWFF) is a short-term structured method developed specifically to help potentially high-conflict court-involved families to re-organize after a separation or divorce (Eddy, 2009a).

### ***Neuroception***

Neuroception is the process through which the mammalian autonomic nervous system evaluates risk without requiring cognitive awareness (Porges, 2017).

### ***Parent Divorce Education***

Parent divorce education is an organized program with a curriculum designed to provide separated or divorced parents with the psychoeducational knowledge and skills needed to support their children's healthy adjustment and overall well-being (Moran et al., 2019).

### ***Separation-Instigated Violence***

Separation-instigated violence is uncharacteristic incidents of aggression or violence that occur during or around the time of separation, perhaps driven by escalating conflict or the discovery of infidelity (Fidler & Ward, 2017).

### ***Subsystems***

Subsystems are distinct dyadic relationships formed by gender, interest, or function, and defined by boundaries that influence how family members relate to one another within the context of repeated interactions in the larger family system (Cox & Paley, 1997).

### **Researcher's Assumptions**

I conducted this research study with an awareness of my bias toward the following assumptions:

1. The quality of coparenting plays a fundamental role in promoting positive outcomes for children transitioning between more than one home;
2. The quality of coparenting is impacted by chronic high-conflict behaviors;
3. The coparenting and parent-child relationships would be significantly impacted by the parent's participation in the NWFF program, and the parents would be able to explain this impact;
4. The participants would answer the interview questions candidly and honestly; and
5. I would strive to remain objective and aware of my own personal biases that could impact data analysis and my analysis of the results.

### **Delimitations**

As with any qualitative endeavor, the research focus of this study has been narrowed to include specific information, while other relevant information has been purposely excluded. One significant delimitation of this study is my ability to accurately portray the participants' lived experiences. Granted, although phenomenological approaches are characterized by self-reports, considering some of the parents in this study could have felt overwhelmed and distracted by active litigation at the time of their participation in the program, they may have inaccurately reported certain aspects of their experiences—thus making it challenging for me to accurately portray those experiences or fully rely on the trustworthiness of the data.

An additional delimitation is my reliance on only the court-involved parents' self-reports to describe experiences associated with their participation in the program. Research on family

interventions would ideally include perspectives from other family members, including the children, older siblings, significant others, or other primary caregivers such as stepparents and grandparents; however, this study is limited to only the parents' experiences of the impact of the NWFF program on improving conflict in the coparenting and parent-child subsystems.

### **Summary**

When a couple with children decides to separate, divorce, or otherwise dissolve their romantic relationship, the family is confronted with a series of unique challenges. To preserve continuity and support the psychosocial growth of every individual, all family members must restructure and adapt to the changed circumstances. However, some divorcing families fail to make this transition effectively, which can lead to high-conflict coparenting relationships, fractured parent-child relationships, and adverse outcomes for the children. Some of these families may look to the courts for support, thereby consuming a large amount of the court's time and resources. In support of coparenting interventions as a resource for family law courts with overloaded dockets, numerous scholars recommend psychoeducation and skills training early in the divorce process rather than later, as the participants' attitudes and behaviors may be less fixed and more easily adjusted. One program that exemplifies early intervention is the NWFF program, which is offered as an evidence-informed systemic intervention.

Several theories are proposed to inform understanding of the complex factors that may contribute to intense conflict in a divorcing family system. These models conceptualize conflict behaviors as social and physiological constructs carried out by and between all members of a family system.

For this study, the experiences of parents who participated in and completed the NWFF program are explored. Viewed through an interpretive phenomenological lens, I examine

common experiences in order to identify themes relevant to high-conflict court-involved family systems.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Insights of Theory and Empirical Research**

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section begins with a discussion of relevant theoretical approaches that can increase the potential for understanding high-conflict coparenting dynamics associated with the breakdown of an intimate relationship. The second section focuses on improving the understanding of high-conflict behaviors in coparenting relationships, including conflict dimensions, patterns, and levels. The third section is a broad review of the empirical literature on the impact of high-conflict dynamics in a divorcing family system, specifically the impact of interparental conflict on the healthy development of children. This review is not exhaustive but intended to shed light on the short- and long-term outcomes for children exposed to high-conflict coparenting. Next, section four proposes positive coparenting as a protective factor for children transitioning between dual households. Lastly, section five of this chapter explores the history behind the development of research-informed interventions. The key focus is on the empirical evidence supporting the potential of these programs to prevent or remediate divorce-related conflict for the benefit of not only the children but the parents and society as a whole.

#### **Theoretical Approaches to High-Conflict Coparenting**

Several theories are proposed to inform understanding of the impact of high-conflict coparenting on a family system. General systems theory provides the conceptual basis for the dual family systems framework and structural family therapy approach; these theories will be discussed together due to their numerous interrelated constructs. Collectively, systemic approaches underscore the importance of looking at all levels of the family dynamics to improve

understanding of the origins and maintenance of high-conflict behaviors. Next, operant conditioning and social learning theories will be used to explain the impact of interparental conflict on the development of prosocial behaviors in children. Both operant conditioning and social learning rely on motivation, rewards, or punishment to influence behaviors. In operant conditioning, children learn by being rewarded or punished. In social learning, children learn by observing. Lastly, a polyvagal perspective will be used to shed light on the adaptive role of the autonomic nervous system in regulating parent and child physiological states during times of stressful conflict. Collectively, these theories provide the organizing ideas offered to explain how binuclear families characterized by high-conflict coparenting inhibit healthy family functioning and well-being and can lead to harmful outcomes for children.

### **Family Systems Theory and Structural Family Therapy**

The crises we face are systemic in nature. To overcome those crises, we must understand how systems work. To arrive at such an understanding, we need to think systemically (Hofkirchner & Rousseau, 2015).

The view of the family as a complex system comes from *general systems theory*, credited primarily to Bertalanffy (1968), whose ideas are considered seminal in the field of family therapy (Minuchin, 1985). From this perspective, a system is defined as a set of interrelated units with shared characteristics surrounded by a boundary (Chibucos et al., 2005). Likewise, a family can be seen as a group of interconnected members who share similar traits and are encapsulated in an environment. Although using the metaphor of a system to conceptualize the family as a relational system is “no longer a revolutionary idea” (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 244), the core principles remain relevant when describing family composition changes due to separation or divorce.

Systemic constructs include properties of (a) order and wholeness, (b) hierarchical structure, and (c) homeostatic features (Cox & Paley, 1997).

### ***Order and Wholeness***

Within a family system, each family has its own unique way of deciding the roles and establishing the authority each family member assumes. These roles are supported by unspoken beliefs and expectations negotiated among the various family members. Order is maintained through reciprocal processes created and sustained by each member (Abrams, 1999; Bowen, 1978; Cox & Paley, 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Zemp et al., 2018). Patterns of interdependence result in all members being influenced by changes in one member (Chibucos et al., 2005). For instance, when one member finds themselves experiencing upset feelings, a resolution to those feelings may be attempted by engaging in certain patterns (i.e., avoiding, isolating, etc.) or pressuring other family members to feel the same way.

Consequently, one member's emotional functioning is predicted to impact the emotional functioning of other family members. The ability of one family member to influence the feelings and behaviors of other family members is frequently described by family systems theorists as the *spillover effect*, a hypothesis suggesting that the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors expressed in one relationship can transfer over to impact the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in another family relationship (Cox & Paley, 2003; Engfer, 1988; Kopystynksa et al., 2020). A structural family therapist may describe this relational phenomenon as a transactional pattern (Minuchin, 1974). Transactional patterns are the bonds that unite a family system together.

### ***Hierarchical Structure***

Structure in a family system is maintained through an invisible set of operational demands that establish how, when, and with whom the family members interact (Minuchin,

1974). Interactions occur in a hierarchical manner characterized by different levels of authority or power. For example, when a parent tells their child to go to bed, and the child obeys, the interaction in that context defines the parent-child relationship. Functioning occurs through interconnected but distinctly different relationship dyads known as *subsystems* (Minuchin, 1974). Subsystems can be formed by gender, interest, generation, or role (Garneau-Rosner & Egginton, 2021; Minuchin, 1974, 1981) and include the marital, parental, parent-child, sibling, or other family relationship dyads. Family systems theorists may propose that the post-divorce functioning of the children is hierarchically associated with the coparenting subsystem based on the health of the post-divorce coparenting relationship. This view makes the coparenting subsystem a critical dyad when conceptualizing the impact of interparental conflict on family functioning and child well-being.

**Coparenting Subsystem.** The coparenting subsystem refers to the relationship between parents that extends beyond the intimate relationship. Minuchin (1974) describes this relationship as the family's "executive subsystem." Coparenting is a significant, multi-dimensional construct within a family system framework, consisting of positive dimensions such as collaboration, support, and trustworthiness, and negative dimensions such as conflict, opposition, and triangulation (Nunes et al., 2021). In addition, coparenting refers to attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and behaviors that describe the interactions between parents with respect to their duties as mutual caregivers of their children (Lamela et al., 2016). Over time, coparenting has grown to include not only separated/divorced parents but also adoptive/foster parents, other primary caregivers, and family members (Becher et al., 2019). It is consistently identified in the divorce literature as a key factor in predicting family well-being and child functioning (Dollberg et al., 2021; Feinberg et al., 2007; Nunes et al., 2021; Pedro et al., 2012; Pires & Martins, 2021).

The quality of the parents' coparenting is frequently described in terms of how well parents can work together on matters related to their children's functioning and overall well-being. A collaborative coparenting relationship is established when the caregivers can effectively work together as a team for the benefit of the children (Dollberg et al., 2021; Kopystynska et al., 2020). Collaboration occurs when there is mutual understanding, communication, and cooperation between the parents about the children; trust, support, and backing of the other parent's efforts; and the ability to successfully resolve the inevitable disagreements that will occur over what is in the children's best interests (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). In contrast, coparenting relationships characterized by frequent arguing, aggression, and hostility are consistently demonstrated to negatively impact child outcomes (Cummings & Davis, 1994; Doss et al., 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Le et al., 2017). The view that the quality of the coparenting relationship is a strong predictor of social and psychological outcomes for children makes the coparenting relationship an important subsystem to consider when investigating the impact of high-conflict coparenting on family functioning and well-being (Nunes et al., 2021).

**Boundaries.** Within a family system, boundaries (i.e., "rules") organize the individual behaviors and interactions of its members (Chibucos et al., 2005). The emotional and developmental growth of the children is guided by the existence and implementation of appropriate boundaries between the various family members. Consider a family system in which boundaries are unclear, as may be the case when family members become too close (i.e., "enmeshed") or too distant (i.e., "disengaged"). In that case, dysfunctional family relationship dynamics may result. In a typical family system, social norms indicate that the adult caregivers will set limits for the children. For instance, when a parent tells the toddler to put away their toys and the toddler obeys, a pattern of authority has been established. For optimal family

functioning, the boundaries of the parent-child and sibling relationships must be clear (Minuchin, 1974). If the boundaries are not well-defined, relationship problems can occur. For instance, a caregiving subsystem that includes a grandmother or an older child can work very well as long as the lines of authority and responsibility are clarified (Minuchin, 1974).

Boundaries in a family system can be seen as falling somewhere between the two extremes of rigid and diffuse boundaries. The presence of diffuse boundaries may indicate enmeshment, where differentiation in the family system is lacking (Broderick, 1993; Minuchin, 1974). Differentiation, in this sense, refers to each family member's individual identity and confidence levels. The ability to be differentiated enhances personal well-being and productivity (Kerr, 2019). A well-differentiated person can demonstrate independent thinking while also being able to consider the thoughts of others, whereas an undifferentiated person may rely on the validation of others within their family or social group to function and make decisions. Low levels of differentiation in a family system can prevent healthy family functioning, particularly in families characterized by persistent parental conflict (Kerr, 2019).

In contrast to diffuse boundaries, rigid boundaries may lead to a disengaged family structure characterized by family members who tend to withdraw or avoid others when there is conflict—an adaptive coping response demonstrated to be harmful to family functioning because it prevents conflict resolution and joint problem-solving (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006; Zemp et al., 2018). Although most families tend to fall somewhere in the normal range of enmeshed to disengaged, a family system that demonstrates boundaries at either end of these extremes may struggle with problematic ways of interacting (Minuchin, 1974; Pickar & Kaufman, 2019). According to Minuchin (1974), families function at their best when the boundaries are clear and the members are self-differentiated. This is supported by the empirical literature indicating that

boundary diffusion is frequently associated with dysfunctional parent-child relationships (Fidler et al., 2019).

### ***Homeostatic Features***

A family system must adjust and adapt to multiple stressors that emerge throughout the family life cycle (Minuchin, 1974). Few structural changes are more challenging to a family than a divorce (Sullivan, 2008). To successfully adapt, family members may change how they typically interact to support homeostasis, defined as the ongoing emotional, behavioral, and interactional patterns maintained within a family system to enhance stability and promote normative development (Minuchin, 1974). When a family has the necessary skills to adjust and reorganize to a difficult transition, such as a divorce, the family may be described as adaptive. Adaptation is required in numerous family situations regardless of whether the parents live together or coparent from different homes. For example, when children move into adolescence, there is a natural move toward independence. This move can be viewed as the emerging teenager's acceptance and understanding of self as an individual capable of functioning separate from their parents (Garber, 2010). As a result of the adolescent's desire to function independently, the relationship between the parents and the adolescent child will change. When behavior outside of family norms or expectations occurs, conflict may emerge that impacts every family member to some degree. If parents respond to normal adolescent behaviors with rigidity or inflexibility, one or both parents may inadvertently undermine the child's autonomy, which could lead to conflict in the parent-child relationship. If the conflict in one relationship (e.g., the parent-child relationship) impacts another relationship (e.g., the sibling relationship), barriers to functional engagement can occur (Abrams, 1999; Bowen, 1978; Cox & Paley, 1997, 2003;

Fitzgerald et al., 2020). If the family system is healthy, however, successful adaptation will be the outcome (Minuchin, 1974).

### ***Applying Systemic Theories to High-Conflict Families***

Numerous constructs from family systems theory and structural family therapy can be applied to understand the dynamics of high-conflict coparenting relationships. Family systems theorists propose that the view of interdependence in a family system indicates that all family members have some level of responsibility for conflict—even if the contribution is by avoiding it. The literature on the adverse effects of interparental conflict and hostility on children is abundant. In a meta-analysis of 38 studies, Ran et al. (2021) identifies a significant positive association between exposure to interparental conflict and children's anxiety. This analysis supports previous research correlating destructive parenting practices with an increased risk for internalizing and externalizing adjustment problems in childhood (Cronin et al., 2017; Doss et al., 2020; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Rhoades, 2008; Warmuth et al., 2020). Such problems may include anger, anxiety, and depression (Amato & Keith, 1991); low self-esteem (Hetherington et al., 1998); reckless behaviors (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003); academic problems (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998; Kelly, 2000); and a decline in parent-child relationships (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato & Keith, 1991; Fosco & Grych, 2008, 2010). For a hypothetical illustration of how a parent-child contact problem can easily and innocently develop in a dual-household family system, see the case example provided in Appendix A. Without effective and early intervention, frequent misunderstandings and unresolved disagreements are likely to lead to repetitive and escalating cycles of conflict in the coparenting relationship (Anderson et al., 2011). As a result of interparental conflict, children may feel intense pressure to maintain alliances with both parents, or, conversely, to align with



one parent over the other (Calloway & Lee, 2022; Fidler & Bala, 2020; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Garber, 2015; Garrity & Baris, 1994; Johnston et al., 2009). The former group of children may sacrifice their own healthy emotional and psychological development as they redirect energies from their own needs and feelings as they figure out how to manage parental alliances or avoid becoming further entrenched in their parents' disputes (Calloway & Lee, 2022). For the latter group, however, despite a good relationship with both parents during the marriage, aligned children may resist or refuse contact with one parent over the other, justifying their rejection by alleging abuse, claiming they are scared, and/or requesting to terminate their relationship with the rejected parent (Calloway & Lee, 2022). When this happens, one parent may accuse the other parent of *parental alienation*, a phenomenon recognized in the high-conflict divorce literature as *parental alienation syndrome*, or PAS (Gardner, 1985). According to Gardner (1992), parental alienation occurs when a child without justification aligns with a preferred parent at the expense of a relationship with an adequate parent. A key factor associated with this dynamic is that prior to the separation or divorce, these aligned children had experienced a normal relationship with the rejected parent (Lowenstein, 1999; Rowlands, 2020). Although Gardner is the first to describe the malicious influence of a parent purposely seeking to undermine a child's relationship with a targeted caregiver as PAS, the adverse effects of alienating behaviors on the parent-child relationship have been identified in the social sciences literature for more than 60 years (Gardner, 1985; Rowlands, 2020; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Currently, the topic of alienation remains a matter of intense controversy and debate involving researchers, writers, advocacy groups, professionals, parents, and, in some high-conflict cases, the children (Drozd & Bala, 2017). This is because empirical research with a priori hypotheses (i.e., previous research based on assumed principles and deductions) and

applicable statistical analyses, including those of a factorial nature, are lacking, and, therefore, the evidence to support the existence of “alienation” as a syndrome is lacking (Faust, 2018). As a result, instead of using the term PAS, professionals frequently describe one parent’s efforts (e.g., bad-mouthing or contact interference) to prevent the other parent from maintaining a healthy and meaningful relationship with their children as *alienating behaviors* (Faust, 2018; Fidler & Ward, 2017). Family scholars and mental health professionals frequently refer to behaviorally based descriptions of alienation as *gatekeeping*, which denotes one parent’s propensity to manage the other parent’s relationship overtly or covertly with the children (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

### ***Gatekeeping***

With respect to post-divorce coparenting, gatekeeping can be defined as both actions and attitudes between parents that minimize or facilitate parental involvement and engagement with the children (Austin et al., 2013; Ganong et al., 2016; Pickar & Kaufman, 2019). Trinder (2008) provides a view of gatekeeping as a non-directional concept, with *gate closing* describing parental behaviors that limit or eliminate nonresidential parents’ involvement with their children, and *gate opening* describing parental behaviors that promote or increase nonresidential parental involvement. Gatekeeping dynamics can vary in extremes, ranging from the restrictive overprotective parent to the parent with no intention of interfering in the children’s relationship with their other parent. *Restrictive gatekeeping* may be justified if there is a history of child abuse, harsh discipline, substance abuse, a significant untreated mental health disorder, ongoing parenting practices that adversely impact the children, or confirmed history of intimate partner violence (Austin et al., 2013; Fidler & Ward, 2017). Restrictive gatekeeping is unjustified if it stems merely from one parent’s belief in their greater importance to the children, questioning the other parent’s competence without justification, misperceiving him- or herself as marginalized,

anger at or a desire to penalize the other parent, and a reliance on the child (Austin et al., 2013; Fidler & Ward, 2017). In contrast, a parent demonstrating *facilitative gatekeeping* supports the children's relationship with the other parent, bolsters the image of the other parent, is flexible about parenting time, ensures that the children have opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with the other parent, and makes ongoing efforts to communicate with their coparent (Austin et al., 2013; Fidler & Ward, 2017). Researchers note that maladaptive gatekeeping behaviors may lead to a decrease in the nonresidential parent's involvement with the children, a poorer relationship between the nonresidential parent and the children, and a further increase in the conflict between the parents (Ganong et al., 2016; Kelly, 2000; Saini et al., 2017). When children are discouraged from maintaining a relationship with a non-time-sharing parent, they may experience *loyalty issues*, a dynamic frequently associated with high-conflict post-divorce coparenting relationships (Faust, 2018). For example, a child who sees the father's psychological pain after the mother has left the marriage to pursue another romantic relationship may feel protective of the father and may forego the opportunity to maintain a relationship with the mother to avoid adding to the father's emotional distress. When a child aligns with one parent in a rigid alliance against the other, structural family therapists use the term *cross-generational coalition* to describe the resulting dynamic (Minuchin, 1974).

### ***Cross-Generational Coalition***

Cross-generational coalitions can occur when an undifferentiated child demonstrates enmeshed boundaries with one parent while disengaging from the other. Previous research demonstrates that when a child becomes caught in the middle of their parents' conflictual interactions and aligns with one parent while pulling away from the other, this is one of the ways that interparental conflict becomes a risk factor for children (Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Camisasca

et al., 2019; Fosco & Bray, 2016; Fosco & Grych, 2008). This occurs because the children experience anxiety-driven pressure, making it difficult to develop and maintain a differentiated sense of self (Kerr, 2019). To calm upset feelings, the children in these families may attempt to monitor or manage parental behavior, creating an inverted parent-child relationship in which parent-child roles become reversed, and the boundaries become blurred (Fidler & Ward, 2017; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Garber, 2011; Johnston et al., 2009). Subsequently, the child becomes triangulated, a relationship dynamic that reinforces dysfunctional interactions in the family system and keeps the child stuck in the middle of the parents' conflict (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974).

### ***Triangulation***

Family systems theorists may use the term *triangulation* to describe how patterns of turmoil in the coparenting relationship can disrupt the parent-child relationship. In this context, a triangle is a small relationship unit anchored in the emotional system (Kerr, 2019). Because mothers are more frequently the primary caretakers for the children, the mother-child relationship is predicted to exert more of an emotional impact on the children than on other members of the family system (Kerr, 2019). As a result, mothers are at the most risk of modeling undifferentiated behaviors to their children (Kerr, 2019). However, despite a mother's greater emotional influence, other family members are also likely to influence the emotional and behavioral dynamics in the family system. For instance, how the father interacts with the children impacts how the mother interacts with the father, and how the father interacts with the mother impacts how the children interact with him. The ensuing triangulation is the result of the context in which the family functions. Certain relationship dynamics may work for the family system as long as the parents are coparenting in a nuclear household, but these same dynamics

may cause problems in dual domestic arrangements, particularly with teenagers who are more prone to demonstrate moral judgments by picking a side. A child's involvement in their parents' conflict is consistently identified in previous research as a predictor of internalizing adjustment problems for children (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Rhoades, 2008; Thompson et al., 2021). In a study conducted by Thompson et al. (2021), three fairly distinct behavior patterns were identified in children who were described as triangulated: (a) *coercive* behaviors, which reflect authoritarian ways of behaving intended to destabilize parental authority to disrupt or end the parental conflict; (b) *caregiving* behaviors characterized by children who feel responsible for supporting their parents emotionally and mentally; and (c) *cautious* behaviors consisting of apprehensive and guarded strategies used by children to avoid parental disagreements. In 2023, these behavior patterns have been quantified and examined as unique predictors of children's developmental consequences. Whereas the children's coercive behaviors predicted externalizing problems, caregiving and cautious behaviors were both associated with increased levels of separation anxiety. Cautious behaviors were also a unique predictor of children's subsequent social withdrawal. These findings add to earlier research conducted by Camisasca et al. (2019), where a significant relationship between greater levels of interparental conflict, parenting stress, and children's triangulation are explored in three distinct areas: the children's direct involvement, their perspective of being caught in the middle, and feeling pressured to choose a side. The results support previous findings demonstrating that children who become triangulated in interparental conflict are at an increased risk for adverse outcomes (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Becher et al., 2019; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Fosco & Bray, 2016; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Of further interest are studies indicating that triangulation can distort a child's view of a parent as a reliable caregiver, leading to harmful

effects on the parent-child relationship and influencing the child to withdraw from a parent (Buchanan et al., 1991; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001; Buehler et al., 1997; Fosco & Bray, 2016; Fosco & Grych, 2008). Family scholars acknowledge that many complex and diverse factors contribute to a child's triangulated position within a conflicted family system (Fidler & Bala, 2020; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Garber, 2015; Garrity & Baris, 1994; Johnston et al., 2009). The takeaway is that children fare poorly when their parents engage in chronic conflict but fare even worse when they are drawn into the middle (Smyth & Moloney, 2019).

## **Learning Theories**

Learning theorists may propose that high-conflict behaviors in a family system are learned responses. The two approaches best applied to understanding the effects of interparental conflict on family relationships are operant conditioning and social learning.

### ***Operant Conditioning***

Operant conditioning (also referred to as instrumental conditioning) implies that behavior occurs as a result of direct and vicarious reinforcement and consequences (Skinner, 1984). People function or *operate* in their environment, and the stimuli that result from their behavior increases the likelihood that a particular behavior will be repeated. In daily practice, operant conditioning may be what some call a habit. There are two foundational principles of operant conditioning: reinforcement and punishment, both of which can be positive or negative. Reinforcement and punishment are the consequences that increase or decrease the likelihood of a particular behavior occurring in the future. When a consequence is implemented to encourage a preferred behavior, the consequence serves as positive reinforcement. Examples of positive reinforcement may include offering a thumbs-up, clapping, words of affirmation, a monetary reward, etc. According to Kazdin (2008), the amount of positive reinforcement it takes to make a

lasting change to a child's behavior is relatively brief. When a consequence is implemented to lessen the odds of a behavior being repeated, the consequence serves as positive punishment. Examples of positive punishment could include criticism, nagging, or adding more tasks to a child's chore list.

In contrast, when a consequence is removed to increase the chances of a particular behavior being repeated, negative reinforcement occurs. For instance, a parent may not give extra chores to a child if they maintain a clean room for a requested period. The parent has removed a consequence (i.e., extra chores) to increase the odds that the child will repeat the desired behavior (i.e., keep their room tidy). An example of a negative punishment could be a parent taking away the child's electronics for failing to complete their household responsibilities.

**Applying Operant Conditioning to High-Conflict Family Systems.** A parent's attitudes can function as negative or positive reinforcement to direct the interactions and behaviors of children transitioning between different households. For instance, as applied to a parent who feels humiliated by infidelity in the marriage, verbal praise can be used to positively reinforce a child for stating that they do not want to spend time with the other parent—the praise (e.g., “I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself by refusing to spend time with someone who abandoned his/her family”) is the reward (i.e., the stimulus) that increases the likelihood of the child aligning with the disparaging parent. Consequently, this parent may come to be regarded as the favorite by the child and is appropriately referred to as a favored or preferred parent in the high-conflict divorce literature (Faust, 2018). According to Kazdin (2008), praise is one of the most effective ways to influence a child's behavior. A child can also receive positive punishment in the form of criticism, disgust, or nagging, which could decrease the likelihood that the child will want to spend time with their other parent.

In comparison, the same angry parent can use negative reinforcement to motivate their child to be defiant with the other parent. For example, if a parent takes away a teenager's cell phone for disobeying phone rules on a school night and the preferred parent seeks a court order that prevents the punishing parent (typically the less favored parent) from taking the adolescent's phone away, the teenager's defiant behavior has been negatively reinforced by removing the negative consequence. An example of a negative punishment could be withdrawing love or affection from a child who reports that they had a good time over the weekend at their other parent's house. In this scenario, the parent has removed something the child enjoys (the parent's praise, love, and affection), thereby decreasing the probability that the child will report positive experiences at the other parent's house.

### ***Social Learning Theory***

Social learning theory provides the conceptual basis for describing the influence of high-conflict coparenting on parent-child relationships. From this view, nearly all forms of human behavior can be imitated or demonstrated by watching and acting together with others in the environment (Bush & Price, 2021). A key focus of social learning is the awareness required to understand, reflect, and modify behavior, although learning can also occur without conscious awareness (Bandura, 1977). Social learning occurs through vicarious and enactive learning processes (Bandura, 1977; Bandura et al., 1963). Research has shown that children learn by imitating others, particularly if they are learning from a role model with whom the children identify (Bandura et al., 1963; Laible et al., 2019). Role models include parents, other family members or caregivers, siblings, peers, and teachers. Research indicates that mothers and fathers play different but complementary roles in the socialization of their children (Yaffe, 2020). By observing and modeling the behaviors of their parents and others, children learn the fundamental



tasks of daily living, as well as how to regulate their emotions and behaviors. An additional source of social learning is the symbolic modeling provided by other visual forms (Bandura, 1977). Over time, schemas and symbolic representations emerge by observing others who establish rules for behavior and expected outcomes. This viewpoint suggests that learning theories are helpful models to consider when designing skills-based interventions for high-conflict separated or divorced parents (Barlow & Coren, 2018; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015; Longmore et al., 2013).

**Applying Social Learning Theory to High-Conflict Family Systems.** During periods of difficult transition, such as a separation or divorce, it is not uncommon for stressed parents to become less effective in modeling adaptive (i.e., “social learning”) behaviors to their children (Hetherington et al., 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Of particular focus are divorcing family systems characterized by destructive conflict behaviors that may include verbal or physical aggression, hostility, and stonewalling (Warmuth et al., 2020). In these families, the interparental conflict has been positively associated with negative outcomes in parent-child and sibling relationships (Ran et al., 2021). Sometimes, parents may express sadness and grief over the loss of their marriage through angry and defensive behaviors. According to learning theorists, defensive behaviors can emerge from the individual being exposed to or thinking about threatening events due to the association with a previously painful experience (Bandura, 1977). Behavioral theorists may describe this behavior as “anticipatory,” a form of coping that protects from real or perceived threats of danger (Bandura, 1977). Coping behaviors can be adaptive or maladaptive. As related to a high-conflict, court-involved family, an expectation of future litigation may activate defensive responses that keep the parents mired in conflict and maladaptive parenting practices long after the case has been resolved in court. In response,

parents may avoid contact with each other to minimize the opportunity for conflict to erupt. Although upset feelings may be diminished by avoiding contact, the issue of functioning as effective coparents remains unresolved. As a result, the dysfunctional coparenting dynamics are reinforced by avoidant coping behaviors (Faust, 2018; Foa & Kozak, 1986). Because parents and other significant role models demonstrate to children how feelings are expressed and regulated (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1981), children exposed to maladaptive conflict behaviors will likely learn how to deal with their conflict in a similar dysfunctional manner. For instance, a child may imitate aggressive behavior toward a parent after witnessing similar behaviors displayed to that same parent by an older sibling, or a child may withdraw from a less favored parent after observing a favored parent engage in stonewalling. At the same time, parents who model effective communication and coping skills will likely provide their children with examples of pro-social behaviors. Fortunately, previous research indicates that families can be taught to demonstrate behaviors more likely to result in positive experiences and to avoid behaviors expected to produce negative ones (Chibucos et al., 2005).

**Corrective Learning.** High-conflict divorce dynamics frequently involve family systems that have become stuck in the process of transitioning to a new family structure. The coparenting relationship may have fully broken down, and all communication and interactions are problematic (Lebow, 2019). From the social learning view, in order to disrupt high-conflict family dynamics, opportunities for corrective learning will need to occur (Bandura, 1977). A systemic approach requires that all family members learn how to be a part of the solution to the problem, including the children, who, under the direction of a court-involved individual or family therapist, may be instructed to set boundaries with parents, siblings, or other family members in response to being pressured to choose sides.

## **Polyvagal Theory**

The polyvagal theory is closely related to principles associated with a systemic approach. It is a viewpoint of human survival that links unconscious physiological responses to psychological experiences (Porges, 1995, 2017). Key to polyvagal theory is the role of the mammalian autonomic nervous system in autonomic output, sensory responses, and regulating processes. Within this theory, autonomic and physiological states are interchangeable constructs (Porges, 2017). Through the evolution of distinct neural vagal pathways, the adaptive cycles of immobilization, mobilization, and social engagement emerge to help humans manage risk and navigate daily challenges (Dana, 2018; Porges, 2011, 2017). According to Dana (2018), the polyvagal theory provides an explanation for how people determine not *what* or *who* they are but *how* they are. Three organizing principles guide a polyvagal approach: hierarchy, neuroception, and co-regulation.

### ***Hierarchy***

A polyvagal hierarchy refers to the components of the autonomic nervous system that responds to bodily sensations and environmental cues through three predictable pathways of neurophysiological response (Porges, 2017). From the newest to the oldest, these vagal pathways include the evolutionary ventral vagus (connection and social engagement) circuit, sympathetic response (mobilization), and earliest evolutionary dorsal vagus (immobilization) circuit (Porges, 2017). Key to a polyvagal view is the biological imperative for connection required by mammals to survive and thrive. Throughout evolution, mammals have adapted to the need to coexist with others with the evolution of the newest branch of the autonomic nervous system—the social engagement system (Porges, 2017). This newer system works synergistically with the more primitive behavioral system (i.e., the fight/flight/freeze responses) to support “health, growth,

and restoration” (Porges, 2017, p. 128). When this system is engaged, humans can connect to self, spirit, others, and the world. According to Porges (2017), the autonomic well-being characterized by this newer system is only possible in safe environments.

### ***Neuroception***

Neuroception (*neuro* meaning “neural”; *ception* meaning “awareness”) is the term developed by Dr. Porges (2017) to conceptualize how the human autonomic nervous system scans for cues of safety or danger from within the body, the surrounding environment, and in relationships with others. When a threat of danger is detected, the autonomic state automatically adjusts to enhance survival. According to Porges (2017), neuroception can be faulty and may not always accurately predict safety or risk. Inaccurate neuroception can make a person feel safe when they are in danger or threatened when they are not in danger. Neuroception answers the question, in this moment, “Am I safe or in danger?” (Dana, 2018).

### ***Co-Regulation***

Polyvagal theory emphasizes the need to “co-regulate” (i.e., mutual regulation of physiological states and emotional processes) with others as a biological imperative for human survival (Porges, 2017). Through mutual regulation, parents and children develop attachments, maintain connectedness, and engage in prosocial behaviors. For instance, within the parent-child dyad, a parent may not only soothe their crying baby, but when the baby relaxes in response to the parent’s efforts, the baby’s relaxed demeanor will exert a reciprocal effect of calming the parent. If the baby, however, remains dysregulated despite the parent’s efforts to calm the baby, the parent may also become psychologically and physiologically dysregulated. Subsequently, behaviors for coping with upset feelings will develop in the family system through a cyclical process of modeling and autonomic reinforcement. These behaviors may be described as

adaptive if they minimize stress or influence behaviors in a way that optimizes health and well-being (Porges, 2017). Co-regulation from an autonomic perspective answers the question, “Am I safe to connect?”

### ***Applying Polyvagal Theory to High-Conflict Family Systems***

The polyvagal approach provides an understanding of the role of the autonomic nervous system as an internal working system of adaptive responses wired into human survival needs that may be unconsciously activated in stressful circumstances, such as divorce. As related to high-conflict litigation, parents and children may be hypersensitive and overly reactive to potential threats, which could easily lead to inaccurate assessments of danger and subsequent maladaptive coping responses. When this happens, the cognitive abilities required to think rationally and engage in productive communication are lost to unmanaged emotions and stronger physiological coping responses. Behaviors that may have initially been adaptive (i.e., withdrawing from destructive conflict) could be maladaptive in a different context (i.e., withdrawing when communication and problem-solving are required to make an important parenting decision). At first glance, these behaviors may appear to indicate an emotional or behavioral disturbance. “She’s a borderline personality, and he’s a controlling narcissist” are common terms applied to the behaviors of high-conflict parents (Johnston et al., 2009, p. 6). Although these parents may appear to be psychologically disturbed when interacting with their ex-spouse, these same parents may function satisfactorily in other areas of their life (Johnston et al., 2009). According to Bailey et al. (2020), rather than evaluating divorcing parents through the lens of pathology, a polyvagal approach provides an explanation for intense stress responses as neurobiological defense mechanisms. In other words, high-conflict behaviors frequently associated with a disordered personality could instead result from a nervous system that does not feel safe.

Due to interrelated themes in the divorce literature, previous scholars encourage professionals who provide services to high-conflict families to distinguish among different types of conflict terminology because the term “high conflict” has been applied to families too broadly and often inaccurately (Johnston, 1994). This is supported by an investigation of legal proceedings indicating that litigating couples may use high-conflict terminology as a litigation tactic to further build a case in court to obtain sole conservatorship of the children (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010).

### **Understanding High-Conflict Family Systems**

It is generally accepted that conflict is unavoidable in intimate relationships (Kaczynski et al., 2006; Warmuth et al., 2020). When a romantic relationship involving children breaks down, the parents and children often experience extreme emotional responses. When parents lack the communication and problem-solving skills to effectively manage their feelings, high-conflict dynamics accompanied by chronic litigation may be the outcome (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Kelly, 2000, 2012). Legal and other professionals may use the term “high conflict” to describe the relationship dynamics in these families (Mutchler, 2017). Although common features of high conflict have been identified and expanded upon, it is a descriptive term rather than a diagnostic label, which makes it difficult to succinctly define (Anderson et al., 2011; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Instead, it is often used in the professional literature to refer to parents who frequently experience intense conflict that results in negative effects for each individual, the coparenting relationship, and other family members—most notably, the children (Anderson et al., 2011; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Johnston, 1994). For this study, the term *high conflict* is used to refer to a separation or divorce process lasting for more than 2 years, with elevated levels of anger, hostility, mistrust, and communication difficulties in the coparenting

relationship that can lead to custody disputes and nonpayment of child support (Johnston et al., 2009).

### **Coparenting Conflict**

According to Eddy and Lomax (2021), high-conflict relationships stem from attitudes of blame, emotional volatility, rigid thinking, and extreme ways of behaving. As a result, the parents may engage in behaviors that appear erratic and unpredictable at times (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Grych et al., 2013; Grych & Fincham, 1990), often creating problematic parenting practices and dysfunctional family dynamics (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Coln et al., 2013; Warmuth et al., 2020). High-conflict coparents may engage in frequent arguments and sabotage each other's role as parents (Johnston et al., 2009). They may also disparage the other parent, refuse to communicate, and make unilateral decisions about their children, which may lead to attempts to undermine or sabotage the other parent's role as a reliable caretaker.

Historically, conflict management styles in families have been viewed as a one-dimensional concept that predicts family dysfunction (Kopystynska et al., 2020). However, recent research has focused on the importance of distinguishing between a range of conflict behaviors identified as constructive and destructive conflict behaviors (Kopystynska et al., 2020). Constructive conflict behaviors are described as respectful communications and regulated responses, whereas destructive conflict behaviors are verbally and physically aggressive interactions that fuel anger and hostility (Bergman et al., 2016; Kopystynska et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Kopystynksa et al. (2020), it was found constructive conflict behaviors are associated with the mothers' and fathers' ability to work together as a team across different family structures. Three family structures were measured: married cohabiting parents, unmarried cohabiting parents, and unmarried non-cohabiting parents. A key finding of this study is that,

regardless of the family structure, the quality of the coparenting relationship is a primary factor in family functioning and well-being. These results add to the prevailing view that destructive interparental conflict prevents parents from working together as caregivers to their children, adding to the growing literature that aggression and hostility in the coparenting relationship are likely to impact shared parenting responsibilities (Kopystynska et al., 2020; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). When there are pervasive patterns of escalating aggression and hostile behaviors in the coparenting relationship, the resulting dynamic is described as destructive (Anderson et al., 2011; Bergman et al., 2016; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Kopystynska et al., 2020; Mutchler, 2017). Research on outcomes stemming from destructive coparenting conflict on family and child well-being is abundant and long-standing. From a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) find that destructive coparenting encourages negative parenting practices across various stages of childhood development.

### ***Conflict Dimensions***

To improve understanding of the various types of conflict found in high-conflict divorces, Johnston et al. (2009) proposes three dimensions to explain coparenting conflict: the *domain* in which resolution is attempted, the *tactics* used to do so, and the *attitudes* each parent has toward each other. The domain aspect refers to arguments over legal issues, including property division, financial support, parenting time, and differences in child-rearing beliefs. The tactics dimension describes how divorcing couples attempt to resolve their disputes, either by verbal aggression or reasoning, avoiding the issue or each other, or physical aggression and coercion. It can also refer to the parents' choice of dispute resolution, which may include litigation, mediation, negotiation, or judicial arbitration. The attitudinal category refers to the level of negative emotions or hostility



felt and expressed by each parent toward the other, which may be overtly or covertly communicated.

### ***Conflict Patterns***

Of particular focus is the parents' conflict-management patterns (e.g., avoidant, cooperative, covert, overt, withdrawn) and the frequency and intensity of interparental conflict (Ran et al., 2021; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011). The importance of intervening in ineffective coparenting relationships is backed by previous research indicating that interparental conflict is associated with compromised parenting practices, such as harsh discipline (Erath & Bierman, 2006; Kopystynska et al., 2020; Rhoades, 2008; Rhoades et al., 2011) and decreased parental warmth and sensitivity (Kopystynska et al., 2020; Sturge-Apple et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2017). In an extensive literature review, Anderson et al. (2011) uses two clusters of characteristics with several distinct attributes to conceptualize high-conflict behaviors: *pervasive negative exchanges* and a *hostile, insecure emotional environment*.

**Pervasive Negative Exchanges.** The first grouping of high-conflict behaviors identified by Anderson et al. (2011) includes characteristics of *pervasiveness, defensiveness, aggression, escalation, and negative attributions with dualistic thinking* (i.e., black/white thinking). This cluster refers to the subject matter and intensity of the couple's interactions. Sometimes, conflict may occur due to a *harsh startup* (Gottman, 1999), while at other times, the parents may attempt to engage in a constructive discussion, but emotions and conflict rapidly escalate in response to real or perceived insults and threats (Anderson et al., 2011). When these cycles of emotional reactivity, escalating behaviors, and all-or-nothing thinking occur within the context of chronic litigation, a coparenting dynamic may emerge in which each parent advocates for themselves as the "better parent" who must safeguard the children from the "worse parent." According to Fidler

and Ward (2017), cycles of conflict are influenced by numerous factors, including different parenting styles and personalities; ineffective communications; the influence of new partners, extended family, or friends; sibling relationships; developmental factors; and the impact of chronic litigation.

**Hostile, Insecure, Emotional Environment.** The second grouping of high-conflict behaviors contains the following features: *strong negative affect, emotional reactivity, lack of safety, triangulation, and mutual distrust* (Anderson et al., 2011). Understandably, parents involved in a high-conflict divorce may feel angry and hostile toward one another. It is likely that these very feelings contribute to the decision to divorce and intensify over time (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Mutchler, 2017). According to Eddy (2009b), in his *NWFF Parent Workbook*, unmanaged emotions and a preoccupation with blame are major contributors to extreme behaviors and all-or-nothing thinking in high-conflict separations or divorces. Over time, the inability to know when the other parent will lash out can lead to such negative feelings and emotionally unsafe environments where seemingly mild interactions can become explosive (Mutchler, 2017). As a result, the parents will feel unsafe interacting with one another, and their experiences of mistrust with one another can transfer to the children (Cox & Paley, 2003; Engfer, 1988; Kopystynska et al., 2020). This distrust has been associated with an inability to appropriately care for the children and can stem from the fear that one parent is undermining the other's relationships with the children, other important family members, caregivers, and friends (Johnston, 1994). As a result, parents may form coalitions with their children, other family members, intervening professionals, and legal representatives, often with detrimental effects (Garber, 2015; Mutchler, 2017).

Over time, families develop relatively consistent patterns of interacting in high-conflict situations. In a seminal three-year study conducted by Maccoby and Mnookin (1992), four types of conflict patterns in 1,100 post-separated families were identified: (1) *cooperative* denoted by high communication and low conflict; (2) *disengaged* demonstrated by low communication and low conflict; (3) *conflicted* signified by low communication and high conflict; and (4) *mixed* shown by high cooperative communication combined with high discord, the least common of the four coparenting patterns identified. Factors influencing these patterns include the children's residence, demographic factors, parental hostility, legal conflict, coparenting by parents awarded joint physical custody, discrepant perceptions of pre-separation involvement with the children, parents' concerns about each other's households, and the parents' new relationships.

Building on Maccoby and Mnookin's (1992) study, later research describes similar patterns of post-divorce coparenting as parallel, cooperative, mixed, and conflicted (Ahrons, 2007). Parallel coparenting describes a relationship in which both parents seek to maintain parenting time with their children but limit parental contact and communications (Stahl, 2007; Sullivan, 2008). Interestingly, children who are parented post-divorce from a parallel model appear to adjust to the divorce just as well as children who are parented in a cooperative coparenting model (Amato, 2000; Sullivan, 2008). Thus, parallel coparenting is frequently recommended as a practical solution for high-conflict coparenting situations (Fabricius et al., 2010; Pickar & Kaufman, 2019). In contrast, coparents who can effectively interact and resolve differences on their own may be described as cooperative. Cooperative coparenting has also been associated with resiliency in children (Kelly, 2007). Johnston et al. (2009) describe cooperative coparents as cooperative colleagues who share similar values, are reasonably consistent in supporting each other's parenting practices, and experience minimal conflict (Stahl, 2007). There

is now voluminous literature indicating that supportive parenting practices increase behaviors characterized by appreciation and respect for the other parent's role and child-rearing efforts (Christopher et al., 2015; Feinberg, 2002, 2003; Holland & McElwain, 2013; McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Zemp et al., 2017). A cooperative coparenting relationship is characterized by behaviors marked by cooperation, support, respect, and effective problem-solving (Kopystynska et al., 2020; Warmuth et al., 2020). When coparents engage in high levels of both cooperative and conflicted coparenting, the relationship may then be mixed (Sullivan, 2008). Coparents in the mixed category may experience intense anger but still attempt to cooperatively coparent. Because of the parents' efforts, the conflict levels are minimal because they avoid and limit interactions. In the conflicted category, coparenting is characterized by low cooperation, poor communication, high levels of control, dependency, distrust, and ineffective problem-solving and decision-making. Conflicted coparents are prone to distorted ideas about themselves, their coparent, and their children (Sullivan, 2008). According to Johnston et al. (2009), they project their feelings and needs onto their children, often expressing them "in the name of the child."

### ***Conflict Levels***

In addition to the identification of maladaptive conflict patterns, different levels of conflict have been identified by family scholars who suggest that making a distinction in a divorcing family system is important because different levels of conflict are associated with different outcomes for parent and child well-being (Kopystynska et al., 2020).

Some of the earliest insight into levels of coparenting conflict was conducted by Garrity and Baris (1994), authors of the influential book *Caught in the Middle*. According to Garrity and Baris (1994), conflict in coparenting relationships can be measured on a continuum of minimal

to severe by using a Conflict Assessment Scale. This scale provides insight into a couple's conflict resolution style, their capacity to cooperate, and their ability to discern the danger in their children's environment. Five levels of *minimal*, *mild*, *moderate*, *moderately severe*, and *severe* coparenting conflict are identified, representing a range of behaviors rather than one distinct category (Garrity & Baris, 1994). The parents can transition between the different conflict levels at any given time, depending on the present and extenuating circumstances.

**Minimal Conflict.** This category describes coparenting relationships characterized by collaboration and relatively low levels of discord. The parents have the ability to separate their own needs from the needs of their children and are generally able to share their children, participate in their children's activities together, and effectively interact and collaborate on issues related to the care and support of their children. Occasional conflict is quickly resolved with minimal expressions of anger. This is the recommended model of post-divorce coparenting due to numerous studies demonstrating that divorced families fare better when the parents can collaborate on mutual parenting practices and form positive coparenting relationships (Becher et al., 2019; Jamison et al., 2014; Stahl, 2007).

**Mild Conflict.** The second category pertains to coparents who experience periodic and brief conflict. For the most part, the parents can effectively interact with each other, although they may occasionally argue or berate each other in front of their children. These coparents may also be described as cooperative despite periodic attempts to form a coalition with the children against the other parent.

**Moderate Conflict.** The third conflict level describes coparents who can function on an individual level for the best interests of their children, but when they attempt to work together, persistent conflict and power struggles ensue. These parents may verbally attack each other, but

there is no threat or history of physical violence. Loud quarreling may occur in front of the children, accompanied by threats to limit the children's parenting time, threats of litigation, and attempts to form a coalition with the children against the other parent. The intervening professionals may direct these coparents to interact in a parallel coparenting arrangement.

**Intense Conflict.** The authors use the fourth level to describe all high-conflict situations except those involving "direct endangerment to a child through physical and sexual abuse" (Garrity & Baris, 1994, p. 48). The parents in these households frequently engage in arguments that lead to violence, are more likely to enlist the help of the police for visitation disagreements, and may seek the court's assistance more than once a year (Stahl, 2007). The children in these family systems may miss out on activities because of their parents' inability to agree on which parent is responsible for what activities.

**Severe Conflict.** The fifth category represents coparenting conflict that poses an immediate and obvious threat to the emotional and physical well-being of the children. Within families who experience severe conflict, the family members are at an increased risk for physical or sexual abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, and severe psychological pathology, making safeguards necessary for the protection of the children.

A consensus exists in the family and social sciences, anecdotally and through empirical observation, that chronic and intense conflict is destructive to children and family relationships (Cronin et al., 2017; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kelly, 2012).

### **The Judicial Impact of High Conflict on Divorcing Families**

As previously mentioned, despite the upheaval in a family system created by separation and divorce, most divorcing families will adapt and reorganize to divorce-related changes within two to three years post-divorce (Cancian et al., 2014; Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly,

2002; Johnston et al., 2009; Kelly, 2012; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Sullivan, 2008). However, notwithstanding the availability of reasonable options, an estimated 10% of divorcing parents will need help from the family law courts to settle their disputes, whereupon these cases may consume a disproportionate share of the family law courts' time and resources (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Similar to seeking emergency room treatment for a critical medical issue, these distressed parents look to the courts to relieve acute symptoms of conflict (Babb & Moran, 2019; Schepard, 2006). Depending on the nature of the case, resolution for the family could take years as previously resolved matters are relitigated, different issues are introduced, new attorneys and other ancillary or judicial professionals become involved, and filings become voluminous (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Consequently, this small subset of parents may spend years fighting in court. According to the observations of Bill Eddy, a lawyer, mediator, and clinical social worker, as well as the developer of the program under investigation, when a former couple turns to the process of litigation to resolve their coparenting disputes, the process of standing against one another as rival parties in adversarial litigation only makes matters worse (Eddy, 2016). This viewpoint is supported by family scholars who appear to agree that although the common law system may be an appropriate way to resolve civil or criminal matters, an adversarial process is not a suitable way to achieve resolution for parents whose emotions are already frazzled due to divorce-related stressors (Babb & Moran, 2019; Bala & Slabech, 2019).

### **The Impact on Children**

Although all families with children experience interparental conflict to varying degrees (Kaczynski et al., 2006; Warmuth et al., 2020), for children of all ages in a variety of different domestic arrangements, exposure to persistent interparental conflict has been shown to have enormous potential to adversely affect their emotional and social development (Amato, 2000;

Amato & Keith, 1991; Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Doss et al., 2020; Emery, 1999; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych et al., 2013; Hetherington et al., 1998; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), with risks to children's emotional health later in life (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). These risks include the development of internalizing and externalizing adjustment problems (Cronin et al., 2017; Doss et al., 2020; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Rhoades, 2008; Warmuth et al., 2020), consisting of anger, anxiety, and depression (Amato & Keith, 1991); low self-esteem (Hetherington, 1999); irresponsible behaviors (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003); academic difficulties (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1998; Kelly, 2000); and declines in the quality of the parent-child relationship (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato & Keith, 1991; Fosco & Grych, 2008). Many children appear to be resilient and can successfully manage the stressors associated with divorce transitions, whereas others may struggle (Emery, 1999). In a study conducted by Salem et al. (2013), it is estimated that 20% of substance use problems, 30% of mental health issues, and 23% of school dropouts could be prevented by minimizing the risks associated with high-conflict separation or divorce.

High-conflict behaviors during separation or divorce most negatively impact children who become directly involved in their parents' disputes (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Many children fall prey to becoming triangulated into their parents' conflict, even children who remain in nuclear family structures. However, when a parent fails to take reparative actions to minimize loyalty issues, the legacy of damage to the children begins (Garrity & Baris, 1994).

Unfortunately, the parents who remain locked in high-conflict dynamics are the least likely to provide their children with a corrective experience. For these unfortunate children, the



chronic conflict in the coparenting relationship creates a significant risk factor for emotional difficulties in later life (Amato & Keith, 1991; Essau et al., 2018; Grist et al., 2019; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Ran et al., 2021).

### ***Children's Coping Abilities***

A child's ability to effectively cope with interparental conflict in their family system is influenced by multiple factors, including their age, developmental stage, coping abilities, and levels of vulnerability (Johnston et al., 2009), as well as any strategies for coping with stress learned earlier in their childhood (Garrity & Baris, 1994). Additionally, the children's experiences of parenting, discipline, interpretation of their parent's conflict, parental mental health, and financial factors are also variables that may impact a child's adjustment to conflict in their family system (Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Grych et al., 1992; Shahinuzzaman et al., 2016). And just as the causes of conflict are wide-ranging, the children's coping abilities are also just as varied. Yet, while most children cope with divorce according to fairly consistent age patterns (Garrity & Baris, 1994), they do respond to divorce-related conflict at different emotional and social developmental levels. Guided by the seminal work of Johnston and Campbell (1988), the following explains how children at different stages of development may struggle to understand and cope with divorce-related interparental conflict.

### ***The Preschool-Age Child***

When parents fight in front of their pre-school-age children, the children lack the skills to effectively protest (Garrity & Baris, 1994). As a result, they may experience intense emotional distress and regress to babyish behaviors (i.e., thumb-sucking, baby-talk, bed-wetting, etc.), have nightmares and tantrums, and experience separation anxiety (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Young children exposed to chronic interparental conflict may also look and act less mature

compared to their same-age peers living in conflict-free households (Garrity & Baris, 1994). The foundation (i.e., the family structure) that supports the child's learning, exploration, and friend-making is shaky or worn away. These children may express concern about their parents' well-being, watch them carefully, check on them frequently, and demonstrate hesitancy at transition times (Garrity & Baris, 1994). It is not uncommon for young children to be used as passive weapons or bargaining chips in parental negotiations over unpaid child support (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). For example, some may precociously ask, "Daddy, are you mean? Mommy says you're mean." Given the egocentric tendency of young children, they may blame themselves for their parents' conflict (Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Grych et al., 1992; Shahinuzzaman et al., 2016), and they may experience self-doubt and insecurity as they realize they lack the skills to fix their parents' problems (Turner & Kopiec, 2006). This is supported by research elsewhere indicating that family breakdowns occurring before age six pose a greater risk to the children's emotional and social development than breakdowns that occur when the children are older (Zill et al., 1993). This may be due in part to the limited cognitive and verbal abilities of younger children as well as a reliance on the parents for consistency and stability (Mintz et al., 2019).

**Their Understanding of Conflict.** The early preoperational child does not yet have the cognitive abilities to comprehend the content of conflict (Bjorklund & Myers, 2015). Children at this stage of cognitive development are more likely to believe that conflict only exists if it is observable (i.e., hitting or yelling). They may wonder if what they hear from their parents is really true and may be easily convinced to choose a side but also easily convinced to switch. As a result, younger children tend to adopt the views of the parent they are with at the time (Fidler & Ward, 2017). By the age of four or five, however, most children become aware of their parents'

conflict but are still unable to see more than one point of view at a time (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston et al., 2009).

**Transitions.** Some children may exhibit contradictory behavior when transitioning between their parents. For instance, a child may feel excited to see their other parent, but when it comes time to leave, they may be tearful or clingy. However, most preschoolers adjust well when in the care of only one parent, and these anxious behaviors are relatively short-lived (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Conversely, some young children may be compliant with the transition but may wet the bed or wake up in the night screaming. Johnston and Campbell (1988) refer to such contradictory behaviors as “submissive distress” (i.e., crying, panic, regression, etc.) or “aggressive distress” (i.e., oppositional demandingness, tantrums, etc.).

### ***The School-Age Child***

As children mature and develop, their understanding of parental conflict increases, and their age-specific concerns and symptomatic behaviors in response to that conflict change (Johnston & Campbell, 1998). School-age children are more likely to become involved, even enmeshed, in parental disputes—they may willingly become eager accomplices in their parents’ conflicts by delivering messages to or gathering information about the other parent (Amato, 1986; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). When a self-centered or immature parent promotes a child as an ally in their adult conflict, the child becomes vulnerable to destructive parent-child dynamics described as *adultification*, or *parentification*—a pattern of interaction that occurs when the child is placed in the role of parental or sibling caretaker (Garber, 2010; Mintz et al., 2019). Parentification can occur during divorce conflict when the parents tell the children about their marital issues. The parents use the child as a pawn to control

each other, which results in the children becoming caught in the middle (Buchanan et al., 1991; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Garrity & Baris, 1994).

**Their Understanding of Conflict.** The onset of logical problem-solving characterizes this stage. This child can consider the perspectives of others and may seek information about their parent's conflict. They are more likely to make judgments about who is right and who is wrong. Research suggests that some parents encourage their children to pick sides, and once the children have made their judgments, they may become entrenched in them and fail to seek information that could change their views or position (Garrity & Baris, 1994). When a child develops an alliance with one parent over the other, the resulting dynamic may be described in the contemporary divorce literature as an alignment issue (Fidler et al., 2019). An alignment may develop for a variety of reasons, including parental shortcomings (e.g., a parent's absence, minimal involvement, insensitivity, etc.) that do not rise to the level of abuse or neglect or because of divorce-specific reasons (e.g., the child feels angry because a parent leaves the family to begin a new relationship, the parent left behind feels angry and betrayed, or there are fewer rules at one parent's home than at the other, etc.). Adolescents who perceive shortcomings in one of their parents may exaggerate those shortcomings by characterizing that parent as cruel, bad, or self-serving and the other parent as mistreated or martyred (Johnston et al., 2009; Mintz et al., 2019). Although some school-age children may continue to demonstrate either submissive- or aggressive-distress behaviors, others may feel desperate for the fighting to stop and make efforts to avoid conflict at all costs (Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

**Transitions.** These children may appear anxious, apprehensive, and tense at transition times (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Marquardt, 2005). As a protective coping mechanism, some may withdraw or isolate themselves from one or both of their parents

to minimize these distressing feelings. Although this way of coping (i.e., avoidance) may temporarily reduce the child's anxious feelings, it also prevents the development of competency and, paradoxically, perpetuates the child's anxiety (Deutsch et al., 2017). Without opportunities to challenge anxious feelings and avoidant behaviors, children can remain stuck with dysfunctional problem-solving strategies and cognitive distortions (Drozd & Bala, 2017).

### ***Adolescents***

The adolescent stage of development is frequently described as the formal operational phase—a period of growth marked by the capacity for abstract, systematic, and scientific thinking (Berk, 2017). Prior to formal operational development, children lack the cognitive foundation and real-world experiences required to make balanced decisions and effectively consider the consequences of those decisions. This is due to an undeveloped frontal lobe (Faust, 2018). Children do not achieve formal operational thought until 11 to 13 years or older (Berk, 2017), although some propose that 50% of adults never develop this level of cognitive functioning (Arlin, 1975; Garber, 2010). Whereas younger children (i.e., concrete operational) “operate on reality,” an adolescent in the formal operational stage can “operate on operations.” (Berk, 2017). The adolescent stage is demonstrated by levels of cognitive functioning that allow the adolescent to make good decisions and formulate reasonable solutions (Garber, 2010). Good decision-making includes (1) identifying the pros and cons of each option; (2) considering the likelihood of numerous outcomes; (3) assessing whether one's goals were met based on the chosen option; and (4) learning from the mistake and making a better decision in the future (Berk, 2017).

**Their Understanding of Conflict.** The ability to make good decisions is considered necessary in many forensic (i.e., court) settings, particularly with regard to the identification of

the “mature minor” in the context of custody litigation (Garber, 2010). The development of formal operations is required to engage in the abstract thinking required to consider multiple perspectives and hypotheticals, making this level of cognition necessary for understanding interparental conflict and the adolescent’s role in that conflict. Parents are frequently surprised to learn how much their adolescent children know about the issues behind the conflict (Garrity & Baris, 1994).

**Transitions.** It is not uncommon for a teenager to play one parent against the other or to prefer the parent with the more permissive parenting style (Fidler et al., 2019). This type of behavior is normal and developmentally expected. However, within the context of divorce-related interparental conflict, when an adolescent develops a moral judgment about their parents’ conflict, a child of this age is more prone to act on their opinion by refusing to visit one of their parents or if forced to go, may remain silent and standoffish (Garrity & Baris, 1994). When a child of any age resists or refuses post-separation contact with a parent, a dysfunctional dynamic may emerge, frequently referred to in the contemporary divorce education literature as a Resist/Refuse Dynamic, or RRD (Walters & Friedlander, 2016).

***Resist/Refuse Dynamics.*** An RRD can stem from various complex and interacting factors, including personality characteristics, family dynamics, conscious and unconscious motivations, and other idiosyncratic factors (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Walters & Friedlander, 2016). More recently, a lack of functional coparenting and the impact of personal and professional external influences have been added as additional factors that may lead to an RRD (Fidler et al., 2019). These dysfunctional dynamics create a perfect storm for a wide range of parent-child contact problems that are often challenging to repair (Fidler et al., 2019).

## Positive Coparenting as Protective

Although many factors influence a child's adjustment post-separation or divorce, the coparenting relationship acts as the "bridge" that children must cross to maintain healthy relationships with non-cohabiting parents. The importance of positive coparenting is frequently emphasized due to numerous studies highlighting the significance of high-quality parenting for positive outcomes for children transitioning between two homes with different caregivers (Christopher et al., 2015; Feinberg, 2003; Holland et al., 2013; McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Sandler et al., 2008, 2013; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Zemp et al., 2017, 2018).

When parents can work together to raise children together even though they are no longer in a romantic relationship, they are described as having a *coparenting alliance*—a term that refers to coparenting interactions where interparental conflict is minimal, and the parents can effectively communicate, problem-solve, and make decisions about the needs of their children (Stahl, 2007). The terms coparenting alliance and cooperative coparenting are used interchangeably to refer to caregivers who keep children supervised, sheltered, and safe. From this viewpoint, coparenting duties are not limited to cohabiting biological or adoptive parents but may extend to other significant caregivers, family members, and surrogate parents. Yet, even with this view, it would appear inaccurate to view every adult interacting constructively with a child as representative of the family's coparenting system. Greenman and Stonehouse's (1996) conceptualization of what makes a positive coparenting alliance is particularly relevant when theorizing about high-conflict families. They highlight the importance of teamwork, mutual goals, joint decision-making, understanding of each other's viewpoints, shared appreciation for, understanding of, and affection for the child, and the absence of rivalry for the child's affections

(McHale & Lindahl, 2011). When parents can engage in these types of behaviors, the benefits to the children are invaluable.

Unfortunately, ongoing conflict and hostility in the coparenting relationship can undermine the protective quality of a coparenting alliance for the benefit of the children (Smyth & Moloney, 2019; Stallman & Sanders, 2014). Research indicates that when this occurs, coparenting and parent-child relationships are less functional, which puts the children at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties (Cronin et al., 2017; Ranieri et al., 2016; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). This analysis is congruent with other coparenting research indicating that interparental conflict reduces opportunities for coparents to effectively work as a team, whereas supportive coparenting leads to better outcomes for children (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Nunes et al., 2021; Pedro et al., 2012; Schramm & Becher, 2020; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010; Visser et al., 2017), and safeguards against harmful parenting practices (Choi & Becher, 2018; Durtschi et al., 2017; Fagen & Lee, 2014; Feinberg, 2003). Other protective factors that positively influence children's post-divorce adjustment include supportive parenting practices such as expressing warmth, being available and consistent, and an authoritative parenting style (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998; Wolchik et al., 1993). In fact, when parents or other significant caretakers provide comfort, stability, and predictability, the effects of high-conflict divorce situations are mitigated for the children (Choi et al., 2019; Cowan & Cowan, 2019; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009). Thus, a causal relationship between coparenting quality and outcomes for children exists (Choi et al., 2019; Cowan & Cowan, 2019).

In research conducted by Kopystynska et al. (2020), data collected from the *Building Strong Families* evaluations indicates that destructive interparental conflict is associated with lower levels of coparenting cooperation, whereas constructive interparental conflict is associated



with increased levels of collaborative behaviors. This study demonstrates that constructive coparenting is positively associated with a coparenting alliance, while destructive conflict is negatively associated with such a collaborative partnership (Becher et al., 2019). To this end, it appears crucial to encourage all divorcing parents to learn positive coparenting skills early and throughout the separation and divorce process.

### **Interventions for High-Conflict Family Systems**

Since the early 2000s, divorce researchers have continued to focus on aspects of the coparenting relationship that mediate child well-being and encourage effective post-divorce family functioning (Becher et al., 2019; Nunes et al., 2021). The accumulated knowledge has resulted in a multitude of programs and interventions, often grounded in learning theories, designed to help coparents learn how to improve the quality of their coparenting relationship (Baker et al., 2012; Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Eddy, 2009a; Fackrell et al., 2011; Reay, 2015; Saini, 2019; Sigal et al., 2011; Toren et al., 2013; Warshak, 2010, 2019).

### ***Parent Divorce Education***

In response to the growing awareness of the adverse effects of high-conflict coparenting on children and their families, the courts in most states have increased their efforts to divert parents from adversarial forms of dispute resolution to more favorable problem-solving methods (Bala & Slabech, 2019). Subsequently, numerous options are available in a diverse array of formats to educate and teach parents how to manage divorce-related conflict in more productive ways in at least 46 states within the United States (Bowers et al., 2014; Warshak, 2020).

Although the duration, content, and delivery methods are varied, most of these programs share a similar goal of preventing or remediating developmental problems for the benefit of the children (Barlow & Coren, 2018; Butler et al., 2020; Moran et al., 2019). These goals include promoting

supportive parenting practices, helping families adjust to divorce, and increasing parents' awareness of the importance of children maintaining post-divorce contact with both parents (Douglas, 2006; Gaulier et al., 2006; Schramm & Becher, 2020). Researchers Salem et al. (2013) provide a summary of the basic ideas that drive these goals:

1. Divorce is a risk factor associated with adverse outcomes for children;
2. Children's adjustment can be positively affected by improving coparenting practices;
3. Empirical research demonstrates the effectiveness of parent divorce interventions and
4. Different interventions are required for different levels of need (Moran et al., 2019).

According to Gaulier et al. (2006), although the more basic programs may be sufficient to help parents who experience mild to moderate interparental conflict, the more basic programs may not necessarily give high-conflict coparents the hands-on practice they need to be able to interact in more cooperative ways. Supporting this view is research indicating that compared to information-only programs, skills-based programs, which include participant interaction, experimental exercises, homework, and joint discussions, result in increased levels of cooperative coparenting and decreased levels of conflict (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). In a meta-analysis by Miller-Graff et al. (2016), results indicate that a combination of psychoeducation and skills training generates the largest positive effects on the coparenting relationship. Thus, it appears significant to note that communication and skills training are complementary. In a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Nunes et al. (2021), researchers reviewed and summarized the characteristics of 21 existing coparenting education programs to identify components contributing to intervention success and program efficacy. Although not every review in the meta-analysis involved unmarried parents, coparenting remained a key predictor of high-quality relationships for every family, regardless of marital status. Consistent with earlier

studies, the most significant positive effect found in coparenting programs is the emphasis on constructive dispute resolution through psychoeducation and skills training on problem-solving (Miller-Graff et al., 2016; Nunes et al., 2021), supporting the importance of teaching coparents necessary skills that allow them to improve supportive parenting practices (Becher et al., 2019; Kopystynska et al., 2017; Warmuth et al., 2020). This pattern of findings suggests the need to focus on education and intervention programs that teach adaptive coping and conflict management skills. From the viewpoint of learning theories, interventions focused on teaching coparents how to improve their behaviors are a viable approach to helping non-cohabiting parents improve their coparenting interactions. Taken together, research indicates that coparenting interventions benefit a family system more broadly when parent psychoeducation and behavioral skills training are offered conjointly.

### ***The Divorce Education Intervention Model***

One of the earliest models for conceptualizing court-connected parent divorce education programs was presented in 1998 by Geasler and Blaisure. This model adapts Doherty's (1995) research, which identifies three levels of family involvement: *passive participation* (lectures, handouts, and videos); *limited participation* (discussion and parent workbooks), and *active participation* (skills practice, roleplays, and self-awareness activities). As presented by Moran et al. (2019), in Geasler and Blaisure's (1998) investigation of thematic content, they identify the most frequently taught topics center on matters that are *child-focused* (e.g., developmental stages, reactions to divorce, and signs of difficult adjustment), *parent-focused* (e.g., stages of grief, coping, and conflict-resolution skills), and *court-focused* (e.g., visitation, guardianship, mediation, legal representation, and parenting schedules). Analysis of their data demonstrates that helping parents learn new skills and providing parents with opportunities to practice those

skills are associated with more extensive and positive results (Blaisure & Geasler, 2000; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998; Moran et al., 2019).

In a more recently published study, Schramm et al. (2018) reviewed over 100 evidence-based divorce education programs to evaluate their curriculums. The literature search was designed to be broad, with the goal of categorizing research within a theoretical context that focused on the divorce-related adjustment of parents and their children. Three tiers of priority for parent divorce education programs were outlined and are summarized by content areas below:

1. Tier One covers *core content*, identified as child-focused issues related to the impact of divorce on children, cooperative coparenting, and improving coparenting skills to reduce interparental conflict;
2. Tier Two is aimed at *strategic content*, identified as adult-centered strategies associated with adult self-care during divorce, managing divorce-related issues, and moving forward with life;
3. Tier Three provides *supplemental content*, which focuses on unique circumstances (e.g., children with special needs, military/long-distance parents, and mental health and domestic violence issues) impacting some families but not all.

In summary, Schramm et al. (2018) note that the tiered content framework captures what research identifies as the essential content areas that should be addressed to improve services for adults and children experiencing the divorce process. The Schramm et al. (2018) study complements Blaisure and Geasler's (2000) early divorce education model as well as the public health approach provided by Salem et al. (2013), both of which encourage general divorce education but with additional interventions provided for families with increased levels of need (Schramm & Becher, 2020; Schramm et al., 2018). To achieve the best results, public health

scholars recommend directing parents to programs that are affordable, timely, and evidence-based (Salem et al., 2013).

To effectively intervene with high-conflict families, systemic thinking suggests the individual intrapsychic factors in the family system, the interactions of its members, and the influence of external influences, such as personal (e.g., new partners or step-parents, extended family, etc.), professional (e.g., clinicians, coaches, health care professionals, etc.), and legal collaterals (e.g., attorneys, guardian ad litem, judges, etc.), should all be considered (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Sullivan, 2019; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001). Because of the precarious nature of high-conflict family dynamics, these families are a primary focus of the family systems scholars who examine the cause, frequency, and most effective ways to intervene with these families (Polak & Saini, 2019).

### **Summary**

This chapter began with an introduction to theoretical approaches that can be used to conceptualize separation or divorce-related high-conflict coparenting behaviors. Family systems, structural family therapy, operant conditioning, social learning, and a polyvagal perspective were discussed. Taken together, these frameworks shed light on patterns of behavior that may emerge within the context of a high-conflict separation or divorce.

Common features of high-conflict family systems were identified, and a broad definition was provided. It was noted that high conflict is not a diagnostic term but rather a descriptive label that may be used to describe divorce-related difficulties related to court-involved families. To improve the understanding of the types of conflict found in a divorcing family system, conflict dimensions, patterns, and levels were reviewed.

Although most divorcing families will successfully adjust within two to three years post-divorce, some divorcing couples may experience ongoing reactivity, with negative effects extending to each parent, the children, and other family members. The children's abilities to cope with their parents' conflict are influenced by multiple factors, including, but not limited to, their age, developmental stage, and levels of cognitive maturity. Positive coparenting, however, was identified as a key protective factor that increases the likelihood of healthier outcomes for children with non-cohabiting parents. Coparent divorce education programs were offered as an effective way to intervene with interparental conflict due to a large body of research signifying that a coparenting alliance is associated with healthier outcomes for children. Thus, ongoing research appears to be essential to demonstrating effective outcomes associated with interventions for high-conflict litigating parents.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Based on an examination of the relevant theory and literature, the multifaceted issues that drive conflict for parents raising children between two homes are becoming increasingly complex. Although numerous programs and interventions are currently available to help non-cohabiting parents learn how to communicate and interact in ways that promote positive outcomes for the children, which approach to use and with whom are best determined in relation to strategies proven to be the most effective for the issues driving conflict behaviors in the family system. With so much information and many viable options, a key challenge to determining which approach is the most effective and which strategies exert the most impact on family well-being is constructing credible research that captures the attention of others and moves them to act (Tracy, 2020). To improve understanding of the mechanisms that hinder or help parents to meet the challenges of binuclear coparenting, the current study sought to explore, understand, and provide meaning to the experiences of high-conflict court-involved parents who participated in and completed the NWFF program.

#### **Research Design**

An interpretive phenomenological qualitative research design was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of the parents' perspectives of the NWFF intervention for high-conflict court-involved coparents. A qualitative methodology was an appropriate approach as it is well-suited for use in studying families (Daly, 2007). Through the use of semi-structured interviews, I explored a comprehensive range of insights and information gathered from the participants' stories and lived experiences stemming from their participation. This approach is supported by previous scholars who assert that qualitative analysis provides researchers with the potential to

identify key features of the participants' experiences that make interventions helpful and meaningful to families (Butler et al., 2020). Similarly, Patton (2002) suggests phenomenology as a tool to identify the real meaning of the participants' lived experiences. The emphasis is on the recognition of the 'critical ingredients' that impact the success of parenting interventions in 'real world' conditions (Butler et al., 2020; Furlong & McGilloway, 2012; Law et al., 2009). The finished product describes the "essence" of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 105).

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenological methods are well-suited for research studies seeking deep, creative, and unconventional insights into phenomena perceived to be already well-understood (Crawford et al., 2021). Through thoughtful investigation, phenomenological researchers gather personified, experiential meanings taken from the rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of a particular event (Finlay, 2009; Tracy, 2020), meaning how the phenomena are experienced at the time instead of the meaning given to it subsequently. Underscoring this form of qualitative inquiry is the approach that human awareness is always about "something" (i.e., a smell, feeling, or need), making this method particularly relevant for answering the "How do people experience?" or "What is the experience of?" questions (Tracy, 2020, p. 65).

### **Theoretical Background**

Phenomenological approaches were developed and implemented in the 1930s as alternatives to evidence-based positivist science paradigms (Tracy, 2020). Researchers using positivist paradigms tend to focus on categorizing the world through hypothetical models using scientific methods. In contrast, phenomenologists reject the belief that the empirical sciences have an advantaged position in categorizing and describing aspects of a "mind-independent



world” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 234) and instead insist on careful descriptions of things as one consciously understands or experiences them. The primary focus is on description (Daly, 2007) and how the finished product captures the essence of the described experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenology is an inductive or bottom-up (Saldaña, 2015) reflective process originating from the philosophical ideas of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and his apprentice, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Husserl, considered the founder of phenomenological philosophy and the descriptive method of inquiry (LeVasseur, 2003), aspired to promote a process that allows for the accurate representation of the real lived experiences of the participants (Schwandt, 2015). According to Husserl, phenomenological approaches are essential for describing, highlighting, and generalizing specific life events (Lopez & Willis, 2004) to discover aspects of a phenomenon or human experience not fully conceptualized in prior research (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Throughout the investigative process, phenomenologists remain cognizant of how existing theories, language, words, and other concepts shape human experience (Tracy, 2020). Husserl encourages researchers to strive to consciously suspend or “bracket” their biases to improve understanding and foster respect for the viewpoints of others (Racher & Robinson, 2003; Saldaña, 2015), what Husserl describes as suspending *habits of seeing* to support a “natural attitude” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 234), or phenomenological *epoché* (Tracy, 2020).

Whereas Husserl was concerned with *a priori* assumptions about human nature, Heidegger thought otherwise. He disagreed that the epistemological view (i.e., how we know what we know) was less relevant than ontological approaches (i.e., the nature of reality) concerning understanding and obtaining information (Tracy, 2020). Instead, Heidegger supported hermeneutics, a process by which the researcher’s “self-understanding and

sociohistorical location neither affect nor are affected by the effort to interpret the meaning of the text or utterance” (Schwandt, 2015, pp. 137-138). Heidegger argued that fully comprehending the experience of others was essentially a subjective process closely related to the use of language in context. As such, he believed efforts to bracket oneself were pointless because it is impossible for humans to suspend prior knowledge and judgment (Heidegger, 1962; LeVasseur, 2003; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Considering my professional training and anecdotal experiences in working with high-conflict court-involved families, it would be challenging, if not impractical, to bracket or set aside previous assumptions and knowledge completely.

### **Population and Sample**

The population for the current study was former participants of the NWFF program. Participants who met the predetermined (i.e., inclusion) criteria were chosen. The inclusion criterion was participants who (a) were 18 years of age or older; (b) spoke the English language; (c) shared in the duties of raising children under the age of 18 in binuclear homes; and (d) participated in and completed all six sessions of the NWFF program. Eight participants, four female and four males, ranging in age from the late 30s to the late 60s, comprised the sample. According to McCracken (1988), the selection of participants should be made with a mindset of “less is more” (p. 17). In other words, it is more important to work longer with greater attention to fewer participants than to work less with a superficial focus on quantity (McCracken, 1988). This viewpoint of working longer and more thoroughly with less people supports eight participants as sufficient (McCracken, 1988).

## **Ethical Considerations**

At the onset of the study, I collaborated with NWFF's key gatekeeper and program developer, Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esquire, to discuss study goals and the most efficient and ethical way to secure participants. Subsequently, a letter of support was provided granting me permission to contact NWFF providers to secure participants (Appendix B). This letter acknowledges permission to advertise requests for interviews for the study, which reflected the participant's experiences with the NWFF program.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The next step involved an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas Woman's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas. The IRB requires researchers to evaluate the potential risks to the participants, including psychological, social, economic, physical, or legal harm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sieber, 1998). The IRB plays a fundamental role in upholding ethical standards and protecting the rights of human research participants. Its oversight helps ensure that research is conducted responsibly and ethically, benefiting both science and society.

### ***Informed Consent***

As part of the IRB application, an informed consent document was developed for the study. This document explains the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and the steps taken to minimize those risks. According to Schwandt (2015), all research subjects have the right to know they are participating in a research study, be fully informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and to be made aware of the benefits and risks of participation. Obtaining informed consent was a crucial part of this research study because it promoted transparency and helped to protect the participant's rights. It provided each participant with the opportunity to make an informed choice about their willingness to participate.

As part of the informed consent process, I emphasized to each interviewee that participation was strictly voluntary and could be discontinued at any time. I emphasized that withdrawal from the study would have no bearing on present litigation matters or future involvement with the NWFF program. The participants were informed that (a) code names would be used instead of real names; (b) age ranges would be used instead of a specific age; (c) data would be de-identified prior to being published; (d) all transcripts, notes, and interview recordings would be maintained and stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office or using password protected software; and (e) copies of the final project would be made available upon request.

Also included in the consent document was information about the study incentive. For this study, a discount code for free registration to the NWFF online 12-class coparent education course was provided. The incentive was given to each participant regardless of whether the interview was completed, or the study was completed.

### ***Limits to Confidentiality***

Confidentiality was protected to the extent permitted by the law. Procedures for protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants were strictly followed, including saving all digital information on a password-protected computer and storing all hard data in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. I was vigilant in removing all identifying information to protect the confidentiality of the participants, although a promise of complete anonymity was not guaranteed. Throughout the study, all processes and procedures were guided by the code of ethics outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2002), including the 2010 amendments. The APA is a professional organization that represents psychologists in the United

States. It is known for its publication manual, which provides guidelines for writing and formatting research papers in the social sciences.

### ***Recruitment***

Upon receiving IRB approval, I contacted NWFF providers in the United States and Canada via email (Appendix C), requesting to interview former clients who had completed the NWFF intervention. The email included information about the study, my contact information (email address and cell phone number), and a Google link to a screening questionnaire containing the required criteria for participation (i.e., inclusion criteria). I followed up only with the participants who met the inclusion criteria. Qualifying participants were sent one email, which included the consent document (Appendix D), a demographic form (Appendix E), and interview scheduling information. If the participants had questions, I offered to set up an initial meeting or phone call. Following confirmation of an interview date and time, the participant was asked to complete the online consent form and the demographic questionnaire. Before the day of the interview, I checked receipts of both documents, and if those documents had not been completed, I followed up with an email reminder. On the day of the interview, I once more confirmed receipt of the necessary documents, and if either document (i.e., consent or demographic forms) was missing, I did not proceed with the interview. Prior to beginning the interview, I orally reviewed the study's purpose, procedures, and risks to confidentiality using clear and straightforward language. Only when all the participant's questions had been answered did I begin the interview.

### **The Long Interview Method**

The present study utilized the seminal *The Long Interview* (McCracken, 1988) methodology as the guiding framework for data collection, analysis, and dissemination of

qualitative findings. This technique is characterized by a semi-structured interview with relevant probing and non-directive questions. The interview may last anywhere from 90-120 minutes or as long as the interview is productive. According to McCracken (1988), longer interviews are well-suited to understanding the participant's assumptions, beliefs, and implicit knowledge. By shifting from shorter conversations to longer unstructured interviews, some researchers claim the discussions are more creative and productive (Thompson, 2005), making this method a useful way to obtain detailed descriptions from a range of people experiencing the same phenomenon (Daly, 2007).

As presented by McCracken (1988), *The Long Interview* method provides a framework for conducting qualitative research that includes four sequential steps:

1. Review of Analytic Categories and Interview Design (Literature Review);
2. Review of Cultural Categories and Interview Design (Researcher Reflexivity);
3. Interview Procedure and the Discovery of Cultural Categories (Data Collection); and
4. Interview Analysis and the Discovery of Analytic Categories (Data Analysis).

This pattern provides the direction for the interviews used to gather information about the lived experiences of parents participating in the NWFF program.

### **Step 1. Review of Analytic Categories and Interview Design (Literature Review)**

The first step of the long qualitative interview began with a broad review and investigation of scholarly literature. This empirical review created awareness that helped me to define the problem and assess the data. According to McCracken (1988), a good literature review requires continual skepticism and a “deconstruction” of the academic literature. It is a critical process that makes the researcher the master, not the hostage, of earlier scholarship (McCracken, 1988). A good literature review is a crucial component of research and academic writing.

## **Step 2. Review of Cultural Categories and Interview Design (Researcher Reflexivity)**

The second stage of McCracken's (1988) method involved a *cultural review* that incorporated my use of "self" as an "instrument" of analysis (p. 18). There were three objectives met during this phase: 1) identification of the cultural categories that aided in the creation of the interview questionnaire; 2) preparation for the "rummaging" that occurred during data analysis; and 3) establishment of the "distance" needed for me to familiarize and defamiliarize myself with my own fixed cultural assumptions (McCracken, 1988). This phase was an introspective activity for me, also referred to as *researcher reflexivity*. The focus is on a "critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth" (Schwandt, 2015, p. 268). The primary purpose was to foster a systemic interpretation of my subjective thoughts, values, and biases concerning the topic of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Daly, 2007). Reflexivity, in this way, is viewed as a core feature vital to "establishing the validity of accounts of social phenomenon" (Schwandt, 2015, p. 268). According to McCracken (1988), this is an essential part of the interpretive process because my perspective "represents vitally important intellectual capital without which analysis is the poorer" (p. 34) and will likely influence the interpretation of data gathered throughout the process (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; McCracken, 1988). This step acknowledges that I am an active participant in the research process and that my perspective can influence the outcome of the study.

## **Step 3. Interview Procedure and Discovery of Cultural Categories (Data Collection)**

The interview guide is of particular significance to a qualitative research study (Bluhm et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2021; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This guide is a structured set of questions that I developed to guide my interviews. Taking into consideration McCracken's (1988) suggestion concerning qualitative conversations, a semi-structured interview guide was

utilized. It helped me to establish a framework for gathering information and ensuring that I was consistent and fair throughout the interview process.

### ***Questionnaire Development***

The development of the interview guide began with a demographic questionnaire that asked the participants to answer a series of straightforward biographical questions. These initial questions provided me with “simple descriptive details” (p. 34) about the participants’ lives that helped me to better understand the biographical realities behind each participant’s subsequent responses (McCracken, 1988). *Grand-tour questions* (i.e., opening, nondirective questions) were used along with *floating prompts* (McCracken, 1988). Whereas grand tour questions encourage the participants to provide rich, informative, and detailed stories about their experiences using their language, floating prompts encourage them to return to and expand upon their previous explanations unobtrusively. Used in combination, grand-tour questions and floating prompts were sufficient to elicit additional information from the participants (McCracken, 1988). Thus, the interview guide remained relatively open-ended to promote unexpected or new findings.

In some instances, however, I relied on *planned prompts* to give the participants opportunities to discuss phenomena previously identified in the literature review that do not freely come to mind. In this instance, I adopted more of a proactive and directive approach by providing the participants with information “to push off against” (McCracken, 1988, p. 35). Throughout the interview, I remained alert for topic avoidance, deliberate misrepresentation, minor misunderstanding, and obvious incomprehension (McCracken, 1988).

The interview guide (Appendix F) developed for this study consists of open-ended questions with floating and planned prompts that were utilized as needed. Prior to its use, the



guide was disseminated to the committee members to evaluate for cohesiveness and completeness.

### ***Interview Procedure***

When the demographic questionnaire was complete, the process of interviewing the participants began. I remained as non-directive and unobtrusive as possible to avoid adding subjective feelings, thoughts, or reactions to the participants' experiences. It is worth noting, however, that although I took measures to acknowledge and minimize my bias, I am aware that "completely objective and bias-free research is impossible for anyone" (Tracy, 2020, p. 267).

The goal of the interview was to draw out the participants' experiences without interfering with their explanation of the experience. Daly (2007) refers to this process as "conversations with an agenda" (p. 139), which underscores the post-positivist idea of gathering information that provides clarification to the question of "What is happening here?" (Tracy, 2020, p. 50). Saturation occurred when I had sampled a sufficient selection of individuals to understand the variations and patterns of their experiences and when understanding had been reached to the extent possible (Daly, 2007).

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded using the Zoom recording option. This was a viable option since participants from different parts of the United States were interviewed. The collected data were transcribed verbatim into a Word document in which manual analysis was used to visually categorize, analyze, and draw conclusions from the data.

### **Step 4. Interview Analysis and Discovery of Analytic Categories (Data Analysis)**

The fourth and final phase was the most challenging. It included the analysis and write-up of the data gathered from the transcripts of the participants' interviews. To aid in the discovery of categories, McCracken's (1988) 5-stage data analysis process was used. McCracken

(1988) suggests that each stage should occur sequentially, with each step leading to greater generality:

1. Coding by identifying significant statements (i.e., utterances) and making observations;
2. Creating meaning units by expanding on previously identified observations;
3. Comparison of observations while looking for general themes, patterns, or relationships;
4. Identification and development of themes and patterns hierarchically; and
5. Combining the themes to form conclusions ready to be academically disseminated.

### ***Coding (Stage One)***

To obtain a general sense of the data, I converted each audio recording into a verbatim transcript that I saved as a Word document. Next, I printed out each transcript and highlighted significant statements. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this step in qualitative analysis is like “peeling back the layers of an onion” (p. 191) to discover the surprising and unusual. Coding helped me to begin the task of organizing, interpreting, and categorizing my data, which led to insight and the subsequent development of themes and subthemes.

### ***Creating Meaning Units (Stage Two)***

During stage two, I meticulously read through the data to generate categories of meaning (i.e., meaning units). Some scholars refer to this process as an *essence description* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). At this stage of data analysis, I was not focused on the substance of the information but rather on interpreting meanings found by observations gathered from the transcripts (Tesch, 1990). I began to make meaning by asking myself questions, such as, “What is this all about?” or “What is this person saying?” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.

196; Tesch, 1990). The emerging themes or categories I discovered could appear as significant findings in another qualitative study or the results section of a thesis or dissertation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### ***Comparison of Observations (Stage Three)***

At this point, meaning units were compared for relatedness and shaped into a general description to form categories and a range of themes from the simple to the complex (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The focus at this stage of analysis moved to the observations and their association with the text. According to McCracken (1988), it is important to compare and contrast an array of themes and patterns.

### ***Theme Development (Stage Four)***

The fourth stage of inductive data analysis required me to move from the particular to the general, described by McCracken (1988) as a “time of judgment” (p. 46). This stage required me to engage in an iterative process of examination and re-examination, in which existing themes and subthemes were grouped into a broader conceptual framework.

At this stage, corroboration with the participants—a process described by Saldaña (2015) as *member checking*—was utilized. Member checking gave the participants an opportunity to review and comment on analytic findings in progress. This type of corroboration provided them with the opportunity to correct mistakes and challenge wrong interpretations of the data before academic dissemination.

### ***Academic Presentation (Stage Five)***

McCracken’s (1988) final stage represents the research as presented from the analytic perspective of the researcher. All interviews were reviewed at this phase, and the discovered themes were placed into analytic categories. This is a crucial step of the qualitative research

process (Trainor & Graue, 2014) and can be reported in various ways (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to McCracken (1988), at this stage I was no longer discussing the lived experiences of the participants from their perspective but conceptualizing the experiences of the participants as viewed through the lens of the social sciences. My subsequent observations led me to form conclusions about the participants' experiences ready to share with an audience broader than my academic community (McCracken, 1988).

### **Provisions of Trustworthiness**

To guarantee trustworthiness, or “standards of goodness,” four qualitative criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were utilized throughout the research process and applied to subsequent findings. These qualitative criteria are referred to as *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*, and these roughly parallel the objective processes used in quantitative research. These similarities, however, do not accomplish similar quantitative goals but lead to qualitative knowledge gathered from finding categories of meaning from one or very few individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The first criterion, credibility (similar to internal validity), refers to the multiple validity strategies I employed to ensure research rigor and the “assurance of fit” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309) between the participants' views of their meanings and my interpretation of the same. Credibility for this study was achieved through multiple strategies, including prolonged time in the field, peer debriefing, case analysis, researcher reflexivity, and participant coanalysis. Participant coanalysis is described in stage four of McCracken's (1988) data analysis as member checking, which occurs when portions of the polished or semi-polished product, such as the primary findings or themes, are submitted back to the participants to check for accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Second, transferability (analogous to external validity) refers to the extent a reader can generalize the findings of a study in terms of “case-to-case transfer” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309). This was accomplished by providing sufficient information about the self (“researcher as instrument”), the research framework, procedures, participants, and researcher-participant interactions to enable others to determine how the findings may be transferable to the findings of other studies. Rich, thick descriptions were used throughout the study to allow the readers of this study to make decisions with respect to transferability.

Third, dependability (compared to reliability) deals with the stability and consistency of the study across time, researchers, and analyses (Tracy, 2020). Dependability for this study was accomplished by carefully documenting the emerging research design and how results were derived. Qualitative scholars refer to this process as an *audit trail*, which can be described as the detailed chronological documentation of research activities, processes, emerging themes, categories, and analytic memos. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend using an external auditor to review the entire research project. The auditor may be a colleague in the field, a peer researcher, or a student advisor, but this individual should be capable of providing an objective assessment throughout the research process or after the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Finally, confirmability (parallel to objectivity) is based on the idea that although objective research is a “myth” (Tracy, 2020, p. 267), the study’s findings should represent as accurately as humanly possible the situation being researched. To support the confirmability of this study, I synthesized the data, analyses, and results so that other researchers can satisfactorily confirm the dependability of the findings, particularly through an audit trail.

## **Role of the Researcher**

During data gathering and analysis, I was a 54-year-old divorced Caucasian first-generation doctoral student. I am an adult child of divorce who was born and raised in southern Oklahoma by paternal grandparents. I experienced a divorce when my four children were between the ages of 5 and 10. As a result of my experience with divorce and coparenting between two homes, my beliefs about the necessity of intervening with divorcing families early in the separation or divorce process are certainly influenced. Subsequently, my perspectives may differ from the options of others who were raised in a traditional intact family system comprised of two married parents. A bias of mine is the belief that most parents have good intentions and would like to learn how to manage conflict with their coparent in constructive ways. This view flows not only from my personal experience as a coparent but from the work I do with high-conflict families as an LPC-S and CFLE. In addition to my licensure and CFLE certification, I frequently serve in the role of mental health professional (MHP) in the collaborative divorce process and provide parent coaching as a court-ordered parenting facilitator (PF) or parenting coordinator (PC)—all roles that require training in alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods. My extensive training in ADR and constructive conflict resolution arms me with the knowledge and expertise to provide individual, family, and coparenting services for families who are experiencing conflict around divorce-related issues. I am aware that my education, training, and life experiences impacted my interactions with the participants during the interviews and my subsequent analysis of the transcripts. To protect the integrity of the research, a process of researcher reflexivity was used throughout to help me to remain aware of my own preconceived notions and biases about interventions for high-conflict divorcing family systems. According to Patton (2002), self-analysis and self-awareness are necessary conditions for qualitative inquiry.

Toward the goal of remaining as bias-free as possible, I worked to bracket my subjective perspectives and experiences (Moustakas, 1994) to diminish the potential negative effects of preconceptions that could contaminate the research process. A reflexive journal was used throughout to reflect on the potential for researcher bias and reactivity. Throughout the course of my research, I remained cognizant of my duty to behave honestly and ethically.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 illustrates the purpose of a qualitative research study, which is to collect meaningful information from the lived experiences of participants who completed a coparenting intervention for court-involved families, specifically the NWFF program.

Prior to the interview process, ethical considerations, including the protection of human subjects, limits to confidentiality, and recruitment process were addressed. Upon receiving IRB approval, an interpretive phenomenological qualitative research study was conducted to explore the perspectives of parents who participated in and completed the NWFF skills-training curriculum. McCracken's (1988) *The Long Interview* method was used for data collection and analysis. Themes relevant to high-conflict family systems were identified through a phenomenological lens. To guarantee trustworthiness, the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were utilized. Lastly, my role as an instrument of research was described, including researcher vulnerability to bias stemming from my personal and professional experiences with divorce-related conflict.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of parents who participated in and completed the NWFF program. This chapter provides a discussion of the results, including how the findings relate to the existing literature as well as the clinical implications and directions for future research. The primary research question was: How do participants describe their experiences in the NWFF program?

#### **Description of Sample**

The sample consisted of eight participants (four females and four males) from various parts of the United States. All of the participants reported court involvement but were not mandated to attend this specific program. Referral sources, however, were all family justice system professionals (Mediator,  $n = 1$ ; Attorney,  $n = 5$ ; Court,  $n = 2$ ). At the time of the interview, the participants' ages ranged from late 30s to late 60s; all identified as white. Of the eight participants, one held a high school diploma/GED (High School Diploma/GED,  $n = 1$ ); six held undergraduate degrees (BA, AB, BS, etc.,  $n = 6$ ); and one held a doctoral or professional degree (PhD, PsyD, MD, DDS, DVM, JD, etc.,  $n = 1$ ). One participant was never married to the parent of their children (Never Married,  $n = 1$ ); one was separated from their coparent (Separated,  $n = 1$ ); two were divorced but married to someone else (Married,  $n = 2$ ); and four were divorced (Divorced,  $n = 4$ ). All of the participants reported they were not living with the respective parent of their children (Not Living Together,  $n = 8$ ). All eight participants reported they had one to three children under the age of 18 living in more than one household (One Child,  $n = 3$ ; Two Children,  $n = 4$ ; Three Children,  $n = 1$ ). Six of the participants reported full-time employment (Employed Full-Time/40 hours or more/week,  $n = 6$ ); one reported part-time



employment (Employed Part-Time/20 hours or less/week,  $n = 1$ ); and one reported being retired (Retired,  $n = 1$ ). All participants reported conflict in the coparenting relationship (Moderately Severe,  $n = 3$ ; High Conflict,  $n = 5$ ) prior to their participation in the curriculum. Post-completion, one participant noted conflict was low (Low,  $n = 1$ ); two reported minimal conflict (Minimal,  $n = 2$ ); three reported moderately severe levels of conflict (Moderately Severe,  $n = 3$ ); and two reported high conflict (High Conflict,  $n = 2$ ). Of the eight participants, five had coparents who participated in the program (Coparent Participated,  $n = 5$ ); and four had children under the age of 18 who also participated in the program (Child Participated,  $n = 4$ ). On average, participation ranged from 3 weeks to 6 months. Table 1 presents highlights of the sample demographics.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age range	Coparent completed*	Joint session**	Children participated	Conflict before	Conflict after
Bri	Late Thirties	No	No	No	Moderate	Low
Trish	Late Forties	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	Low
Bobby	Late Forties	Yes	Yes	No	High	Low
Jane	Late Thirties	Yes	Yes	No	Moderate	Moderate
Liza	Late Fifties	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	Moderate
Luke	Late Sixties	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	High
Ron	Early Forties	No	No	No	High	High
Ryan	Mid Fifties	Yes	No	Yes	Moderate	Moderate

*Note.* \*Coparent completed the training; \*\*Participant completed a joint session with coparent

## **Brief Description of Participants**

This section presents a brief description of the eight parents who were interviewed for this study and whose subjective thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and responses were used to conduct data analysis. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, each parent was assigned a code name prior to the interview, and age ranges were used instead of reported ages.

### ***Bri***

Bri was in her late 30s. Bri and her coparent were both referred to the program by their attorneys during mediation. She thought the referral process was easy and straightforward. Bri's coparent and their elementary school-aged child did not participate in the program.

### ***Trish***

Trish was in her late 40s. Although participation in the curriculum was voluntary, the process began as a result of a judge ordering her and her coparent to participate in family counseling. Trish reported the legal professionals were helpful in giving them options to choose from, but she found it to be challenging because "it took a while." Trish, her coparent, and the oldest of their two adolescent children participated in the program.

### ***Bobby***

Bobby was in his late 40s. He heard about the program from his attorney. He found the referral process was smooth and uncomplicated. Bobby and his coparent participated in the program, but their two children did not participate.

### ***Jane***

Jane was in her late 30s. She and her coparent were referred to the program by their attorneys. While Jane believed the referral process was time-consuming, it was a fairly smooth

and easy experience. She and her coparent both participated in the program, but their elementary school-aged child did not.

### ***Liza***

Liza was in her late 50s. She and her coparent were referred to the program by their attorneys during mediation. She thought the referral process was easy, mainly because she trusted her attorney, who highly recommended the coach. Liza reported that after mediation, she and her attorney did not interact any further. Liza, her coparent, and their adolescent-aged child participated in the program.

### ***Luke***

Luke was in his late 60s. He did not have any interactions with a judge and was unable to remember if the court or his attorney referred him to the program but thought it might have been the judge. He found, however, his attorney was easy to work with. Luke, his coparent, and their adolescent-aged child participated in the program.

### ***Ron***

At the time of the interview, Ron was in his early 40s. Ron voluntarily chose to participate in the program after consulting with his attorney. Ron's coparent and his two elementary school-aged children did not participate in the program.

### ***Ryan***

At the time of the interview, Ryan was in his mid-50s. The court ordered him, his coparent, and their three children to participate in a family counseling program, and the attorneys referred them to the program. He thought the referral process went smoothly for them. He and his coparent participated in the individual sessions but did not participate in the joint parent session. Ryan's three children participated in the parent-child counseling sessions with him only.

## Thematic Synthesis

Three key themes and twelve subthemes were developed during data synthesis representing various aspects of the parents' perceptions and experiences of the NWFF program: (1) Family Relationships (Improving the Coparenting Relationship and Improving the Parent-Child Relationship), (2) What Parents Found Helpful (Individual Meetings , Homework Assignments , Practitioner Support , Joint Parent Session , and Joint Parent-Child Sessions), and (3) Suggestions for Program Improvement (Extend Program Length , Expand Program Content , Require Participation of Both Parents and Collaboration with Other Professionals). Systematically organizing the data in this way served as a crucial step in transforming the raw data into meaningful knowledge that was developed to create a coherent narrative. Table 2 depicts the themes and subthemes and which participants identified as significant.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes Aligned With Participant Interviews*

Themes and subthemes	Bri	Trish	Bobby	Jane	Liza	Luke	Ron	Ryan
Theme 1: Family Relationships								
Improve the Coparenting Relationship	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Improve the Parent-Child Relationship		x	x			x		x
Theme 2: What Parents Found Helpful								
Individual Meetings	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Homework Assignments	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Practitioner Support	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Themes and subthemes	Bri	Trish	Bobby	Jane	Liza	Luke	Ron	Ryan
Joint Parent Session		x	x	x	x	x		
Parent-Child Session		x			x	x		x
Theme 3: Suggestions for Program Improvement								
Expand Program Length	x			x			x	
Expand Program Content				x			x	
Require Participation of Both Parents	x						x	x
Education about Legal Impact	x						x	
Collaboration with Other Professionals		x						

### **Theme 1: Family Relationships**

The theme of Family Relationships is associated with the parents' hopes and goals for improving the coparenting and parent-child relationships as well as outcomes related to those expectations. At the beginning of each interview, all parents were asked to share what they hoped to get out of the program prior to beginning. The most common responses included improving and/or repairing the coparenting and/or parent-child relationships.

#### ***Subtheme 1: Improving the Coparenting Relationship***

All the parents, with the exception of one, mentioned goals around improving the quality of the coparenting relationship, mostly for the benefit of their children. This was a goal even for the parents who participated in the program without their coparent. Parents described various challenges with coparenting such as difficulties with communication, decision-making, and

stressful interactions. A sense of frustration and helplessness stemmed from the parents' inabilities to effectively communicate and problem-solve with their respective coparents, which functioned as a motivation for taking part in NWFF. Bri, for example, participated in the program by herself. She identified one of the reasons she was willing to do this was because her attorney told her it would help her with coparenting. She hoped to learn ways to improve her communication with her ex-husband so that he would be willing to speak with her more often. She also hoped the program would give her skills to emotionally support her child and make things easier for her current family. Bri stated she felt expected to be the responsible one, noting that "being the one parent who's stressing themselves out trying to make everything better" was stressful and overwhelming to her. Similar to Bri, Ron also participated in the program without his coparent. He wanted a program that said, "Look, this is how you can look at things you know, outside of your biases and perspectives from another." He thought his participation could help him to see things from his coparent's perspective, which could help ease the tension between them and improve communication. Similarly, Trish hoped she and her ex-husband could work together so they open up lines of communication that would allow them to be better parents for their children. She expressed frustration that her coparent involved the court and hoped instead to collaborate with him to get the legal professionals out of their lives. Trish also expressed regret about the divorce conflict and its effect on her children, emphasizing the kids "didn't ask for a divided family." Bobby identified his main goal as improving the coparenting relationship. He wanted the program to help him figure out some new ways to work together with his ex-wife for the sake of their kids:

The only thing I was hoping to get out of it was better communication—better cooperation with my coparent. So, I mean, really, I didn't have a goal per se, but just hopefully to make the relationship better with my coparent.

Bobby also thought the program would be a good opportunity to discuss contemporary issues that were coming up for them and their older children. Jane also expressed hopes for a better coparenting relationship. She hoped the program could help her and her coparent improve communication so they could see each other's perspectives and work as a team to make decisions for their child with less hostility and conflict. She had expectations that the influence of a neutral coach would give her the opportunity to share her perspective with her coparent in a safe space. Lastly, Ryan shared that his main goal was to figure out some things that would work better for him and his ex-wife so the doors of communication could be opened. He noted that for this to happen, they would need to mend their wounds, and hoped the program would give them that opportunity.

Two of the parents shared wishes to improve the coparenting relationship but focused more on what their coparent needed to do to make that happen. Both described desiring their ex-partner to learn how to change and learn new skills to interact with them and their children more effectively. Liza wanted to see evidence of behavioral change in her ex-partner because she wanted him to “come to an understanding about boundaries.” She described feeling frustrated because he did not respect her or the kids' boundaries and looked to her to do all of the problem-solving for the messes he created. She thought if he learned how to interact with her and the children more effectively, this would be helpful to all of them, even to the child who was away at college. Similar to Liza, Luke also thought the coparenting relationship would improve if his ex-partner changed. He perceived his ex-wife to be uninterested in the program because she was

unable to see her contribution to the conflict in their relationship and she thought their problems were his fault. Because of this mindset, Luke hoped the program and the influence of a third party would help her to see her own issues. In the process, he also wished that, because he felt his coparent influenced their children and their attitudes, that she would then encourage their children to spend more time with him, which would allow him to reestablish relationships with them.

### ***Subtheme 2: Improving the Parent-Child Relationship***

Of the four parents who participated in the program with their children, all expressed desires for improvements in their relationships with their children. These expectations included repairing and/or restoring the parent-child relationship, reducing their child's hostility toward them, and getting to know their children better. Three of the participants shared that at the time of the program, their children were resisting contact with them for various reasons. Trish shared that at the time of her participation, she was not seeing either of her children regularly and wanted to reestablish contact. When her attorney mentioned the program, she did not hesitate to sign up. She anticipated the program would teach her how to interact and communicate with her children more productively, particularly the oldest, who displayed hostile behavior toward her. She felt confused by her oldest child's rejection of her and described feeling angry with the court for granting an emergency restraining order that damaged her relationships with her children, the oldest in particular. Trish explained:

I was hoping to get back my relationship with my child that had been severed by the judge who initially signed off on a temporary emergency hearing. I was on an airplane with no access to a phone and wasn't able to attend. I think there should have been a different time frame, because then that, I think, escalated everything. It was like, "Oh,



there's this emergency restraining order filed against a person," when there was actually no evidence for that to be ruled upon. So that judge, I feel, made a huge error in their judgment for that—not knowing all the facts.

Trish did report an improvement in her oldest child's behavior as the program progressed and felt like she was partially regaining parental influence.

Luke was one of the older parents who participated in the program. Throughout the interview, he frequently mentioned feeling frustrated because his child was not willing to spend time with him, while he felt pressured to spend more quality time with the child because of Luke's advanced age. He thought the key to this issue was through his coparent and hoped her own participation in the program would help her see his value to their children's lives. Regardless of the mother's input, Luke was willing to learn new skills and hoped having new ways of interacting and communicating with his younger child would help repair his relationship with that child. Luke explained:

There was a lot of hostility on the part of my child, and I was hoping that that would go away. In other words, whatever was agitating the child, or those kinds of things would, you know, surface, and, you know, go away.

Luke reflected that at the time of the program, he did see slight improvement in his relationships with both of his children even though his youngest was the only one who participated in the program. He thought the parent-child sessions helped to calm his child down and be more willing to consider his feelings.

Despite regular contact with his children, Ryan shared similar expectations of improving the quality of his relationships with them. He believed the program would help him improve his listening skills so he could get to know his children's feelings better, allowing him to form a

stronger and deeper relationship with them. Ryan noted, “I was mindful of, ‘Let’s slow things down and let’s listen to what the children’s feedback is.’” He was able to recognize that his children had anxieties stemming from his way of speaking and interacting with them. He thought the parent-child sessions helped him to understand that his kids needed to be able to express themselves and that he could validate their feelings without giving away his parental authority.

The four parents who participated without their children also expressed the prospect of learning skills to improve parent-child interactions. Bri stated she wanted to learn new skills so she could teach her child how to cope better with the divorce. She hoped to calm her child down and encourage his confidence. She thought this would benefit him greatly. Bobby also hoped his participation would improve how he supported his children between two homes. He shared that he was open to learning new ways of parenting that would minimize the stress of going back and forth for them. He emphasized that he was not the kind of dad who only wanted to parent on weekends:

I know there are some families that don’t do well and some fathers that don’t want to be involved with their kids. And I’m quite the opposite. I really like my kids and want the best for them.

Despite not being able to participate in the parent-child sessions, Bobby found the program encouraged him to look for common ground with his kids and to work at having a cheerful outlook for their benefit. Jane hoped she would learn skills to make her child’s environment “less chaotic.” She did not really observe a change in the relationship with her child but thought the program helped her to understand the influence she had over her child’s adjustment to the divorce. Ron wanted to see his divorce “through the eyes of his kids” so he could interact with them in more positive ways. He anticipated learning skills to manage his

emotions better so he could teach his children how to manage their own feelings, too, understanding this would be beneficial not only to the parent-child relationship but to his kids individually.

## **Theme 2: What Parents Found Helpful**

What Parents Found Helpful includes factors related to the individual meetings with their coach, the homework assignments in the parent workbook, the encouragement and guidance of the coach/counselor, and the joint parent and parent-child sessions. Generally, all the parents were able to recall aspects of the program that had been helpful to them, although impressions of where that value came from were varied.

### ***Subtheme 1: Individual Meetings***

All of the parents were able to identify aspects of the individual meetings with their coach or counselor as helpful. This subtheme overlaps somewhat with the influence of the coach but is mentioned separately, as not all parents thought their coach was particularly helpful in promoting change in their family system. Bri was one of the parents who completed the program without a coparent. She thought the individual meetings helped her to focus more on what she could do as opposed to focusing on what her coparent needed to do. As a result, she was able to process issues that made her look at what she and her coparent were doing well instead of looking to see what he was doing wrong. Ron also completed the program without a coparent but reflected that he was actually okay with that. Going into the program, he hoped that if he could break the cycle of conflict by changing his own behavior, his coparent would see that and also work at changing her behavior. He was able to realize that the best way to reduce conflict in the coparenting relationship was to start by changing himself. Trish liked the individual meetings because they gave her a chance to reflect on the events that had transpired for her family and

identify ways she could do her part in reducing the conflict between her and her coparent, but also repair some of the hurt feelings between her and her child. Trish reflected:

It was helpful that I came and had separate meetings on my own, and then that the father of the children came and had separate meetings for some self-discovery, I think on both sides. Then I believe the father and I met together before the child was introduced into meeting back with me and I know the child also had separate meetings. So, I think that was good and helpful.

At the time of the interview, Trish and her coparent and her child were communicating regularly but she was clear that those benefits occurred “after graduating from this program.” Similar to Trish, Bobby also appreciated the individual meetings. He thought being able to talk through real-life issues by himself was helpful. He appreciated being able to focus on how these issues related to him and talk through specific examples. Jane liked the individual meetings because they gave her coach time to get to know her before working with her and her coparent. She appreciated the opportunity to share her story from her perspective and receive individual feedback about what she could do to make things better. Liza was not interested in participating with her coparent, so she found a tremendous benefit to the individual sessions with her coach. She appreciated being able to discuss delicate situations in private without having to worry about saying something that would trigger her coparent. As a result, she was able to learn new ways to set and maintain her boundaries that she was able to apply in the joint parent meeting but also in real-life situations. Luke thought the individual sessions gave him insight into what he could do differently, but also helped him to feel more accepting of his child’s negative attitude toward him. The outcome for him was that he was able to find peace in a situation that he considered to be beyond his control. Ryan thought the individual meetings led to discussions that helped him

see that he was an okay parent after all. Although his coparent participated in the individual counseling portion of the program, they did not meet jointly for session six [Learning from Both Parents]. As a result of the focused time on what he could do differently, he was able to develop confidence that helped him to improve how he listened to his children's feelings and concerns.

### ***Subtheme 2: Homework Assignments in Parent Workbook***

The homework assignments in the parent workbook were commonly reported to be helpful. Most parents described learning new strategies as a result of reflecting on the homework and discussing it with their coach. Bri described the homework as valuable because the questions forced her to think hard about how to apply the skills to herself, and she described the experience of completing the homework as "thought-provoking." Bri remarked:

They [the homework assignments] were very helpful. It made me really think about things and reflect on stuff because we're not all perfect, you know. It made me think you could do better, and you get it when you're really working through that stuff and you're thinking about what your perception was before.

As a result, Bri was able to develop a new perspective and identify some of her own behaviors that could have been contributing to the conflict between her and her coparent. This insight made the coparenting situation seem less stressful for her and helped her to refocus on what she could individually do to make things better for her family. Instead of trying to change or control her coparent, she made a conscious decision to concentrate on what she could control and change about herself. Subsequently, she sought mental health services for herself and her child.

Trish also found the homework assignments effective. Similar to Bri, she thought the homework encouraged "self-discovery," and forced her to reflect on things about her parenting

that she needed to change, like adjusting her behavior. She liked that she did the homework on her own and then met with her coach to talk about her responses to the questions. She described the homework assignment where they each had to come up with positive things to say about the other parent as useful in getting her to see her coparent's positive qualities; she felt that due to "all of the hate and negativity," finding something to appreciate about her ex-husband created somewhat of a mental balance that allowed her to move forward and feel better about coparenting with him. She also described the order of the homework as helpful because it was "like ABC," and kept things organized in her mind. She thought the sequence went well and the materials built on each other. For Bobby, he found the examples in the parent workbook were worthwhile because they taught him new skills for communicating with his coparent. While he could not remember the name of a specific homework lesson, he believed talking through its examples was helpful to him. He thought bringing those issues to light made everything feel "less negative" and helped him to realize he was not alone in his divorce-related struggles. Recognizing this helped him to feel hopeful that there were solutions to his family's issues. Liza described going through the parent workbook as valuable because it provided her with context for her current situation. She thought the assignments paved the way for productive discussions about issues she had not thought of before. As a result, she realized the importance of self-care for not only herself but for her child as well. Luke did not have much to say about the homework assignments, although he deemed they were "somewhat helpful" to him at the time. He thought his child should have also had homework to complete. At the time of the interview, he could not recall anything specific that stood out to him now that the program was over. Ryan judged the homework assignments to be helpful because they improved his confidence about being able to listen to his children's feelings and concerns. He appreciated the lesson about age-appropriate

expectations because it helped him to develop more realistic expectations about his children's responsibilities during his parenting time.

Two parents specifically identified the Making Proposals exercise as a useful tool for learning how to ask their coparent for something in a structured manner. Jane thought the homework assignment focused on learning how to make proposals without bringing in her emotions was beneficial. She learned how to stay calm and respond when feeling criticized, primarily through the Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm (BIFF) exercise, and found this felt empowering. Jane also believed the homework was useful because it made her and her coparent learn and reflect on the same materials at the same time. Overall, she thought the program did a respectable job of providing a foundation for effective communication. Ron also described the Making Proposals exercise as "extremely helpful" in encouraging him to be more aware of how his requests to his coparent could be perceived. Learning how to ask her for something in a noncombative way stood out to him as something he needed to work on in order to reduce introducing conflict into their conversations. He also shared that he liked having a workbook to write things down in because he likes to refer to his notes when he is in a pickle, admitting that "still to this day, I use those techniques in how I communicate." He explained that the skills have been effective in coparenting communications as well as at work and with his kids.

### ***Subtheme 3: Practitioner Support***

Out of the eight parents who were interviewed for the present study, all were able to identify positive aspects of receiving support from a coach or a counselor. Bri thought her coach helped her to see things she needed to change. She described the coach's feedback as the "being forward" piece of the program and noted that although others might see feedback from their coach as criticism, she saw it as positive encouragement to work on herself. Trish shared similar

thoughts about her coach, whom she perceived as “genuinely interested in trying to help her family.” She appreciated the individual meetings with her coach, believing the consultations gave the coach an opportunity to point out what she needed to see “whether she wanted to see that or not” without calling her out in front of her coparent. She thought the coach’s feedback encouraged her to recognize what she individually needed to work on and “get it all out” as she talked openly about her feelings and perspectives. In the joint meeting with her coparent, Trish thought both of their coaches did a decent job of challenging them both, but in an objective manner, which helped them to identify and discuss issues without assigning blame. She also thought the coaches did well keeping the parent-child sessions on track. Bobby also reported a positive experience with his coach. He thought his coach gave him “some really good tips” as well as constructive feedback on behaviors he needed to change. Jane liked that the coaches took time to get to know her and her coparent individually before the joint session. She found her coach challenged her but was compassionate to her situation. Liza specifically identified the coach’s ability to remain objective as helpful. She thought he did a good job of making her coparent and her child feel like they were all on safe turf. She appreciated that the coach did not pick sides but instead talked them through the conflict so they could produce their own solutions. She felt like he “was very fair” and “kept the playing field very level” through their interactions. For Luke, he saw the influence of the coach as one of the most helpful aspects of the program. He appreciated the coach’s ability to challenge both him and his coparent without picking one side over the other: “My coach was very helpful. She was objective from an outsider’s point of view, and she brought a different perspective to the table that the other side needed to hear. Now, I don’t think they [my coparent and my child] listened, but at least it gave me a perspective that, ‘Hey, you know, this is not all me—It takes two to tango!’” He particularly appreciated the coach



providing feedback to his coparent because he thought she needed to hear it from someone other than him. At the same time, Luke reflected his coach could have done a better job of making his coparent to be more accountable. As discussed previously, he described his coparent as the one with all of the influential authority. He felt disappointed because the coach did not try to get his coparent “on board” to influence the child’s attitude about spending more time with him. He shared their child had learned how to “conquer and divide,” and he felt frustrated and disappointed because there was little he could do about it. In light of this reality, Luke explained that he finally got to the point of acceptance, saying, “You know, I’m done being upset about the fact that my child’s upset and doesn’t want to spend time with me.” He thought the individual sessions with his coach helped him to feel more acceptance about his child’s attitude toward him and he felt peace about that. As for Bobby, he described his coach as “fair,” while at the same time emphasizing his awareness of fair as a “really bad word.” To clarify, he explained the coach encouraged him to see his part without picking sides. After his experiences with the court, where he felt his coparent had an influence as the mother, Bobby valued how the coach helped him calm down and recognize that he, too, had influence over his children. Ryan described the coach as supportive of both him and his children. He thought the discussions with his coach gave him the confidence to know that although his way of parenting was different than his coparent’s, his parenting skills were “still okay.” Recognizing this about himself made him feel encouraged and hopeful.

#### ***Subtheme 4: Joint Parent Session***

Of the five parents who participated in the joint session with their coparent, all reported beneficial aspects from the meeting. Trish regarded the joint parent sessions as helpful in helping her to work through some unresolved issues that helped her to move forward. She liked how she

and the father were able to meet together before the parent-child sessions to discuss their mutual concerns. She thought that meeting paved the way for discussions that created new perspectives for both of them. Similarly, Bobby thought the joint parent session helped him to recognize some good things he saw his coparent doing. He thought bringing those things to light in a positive and productive way was helpful to the coparenting relationship. He described a shift in his coparent's attitude toward him when she heard him say positive things about her. Jane specifically identified the joint parent session as the most helpful aspect of the program. She thought she and her coparent were able to discuss some critical issues in a structured way, which helped her to avoid getting triggered. Liza defined the joint meeting with her coparent as "enlightening" because it opened up the discussion for joint problem-solving on some older topics that still needed resolution. As a result, she thought her coparent's attitude toward her had softened somewhat. For Luke, he believed the joint parent session impacted his communication with his coparent, encouraging them both to see some common ground. He felt disappointed, though, that the improvements in communication with his coparent did not translate into her encouraging their child to spend more time with him.

#### ***Subtheme 5: Parent-Child Sessions***

Out of the four parents who participated in the parent-child counseling sessions, all four described the sessions with their child(ren) as helpful. Trish thought the parent-child meetings provided an opportunity for her and her child to say things to each other in a relaxed and structured way. Being able to talk through their misunderstandings improved their understanding of each other's feelings and helped them to get their relationship back on track. Liza reflected that the parent-child sessions were valuable because she learned how to validate her child's feelings while at the same time allowing the child to see her perspective as well. Ryan, similarly,

held the view that the joint parent-child sessions encouraged his children to think more about their feelings and provided an opportunity for them to express their concerns:

I think it got my children thinking about their emotions. Thinking about that they do have a voice—thinking that it’s a two-way street that they can communicate with me, and I can communicate with them. That has been helpful to remind me that sometimes they need to talk about things as well.

Luke, also, perceived the parent-child sessions to be helpful at the time of the program. He felt hopeful because he observed a mild improvement in his child’s attitude toward him which made him think they were finally moving to some common ground. However, at the time of the interview, Luke reported there was virtually zero communication with his child, and he was disappointed that the positive parent-child sessions did not impact his child’s willingness to spend more time with him outside of the therapist’s office. He thought that, without his coparent’s encouragement, the influence he could exert on his child would remain limited.

### **Theme 3: Suggestions for Improvement**

Suggestions for Improvement include thoughts related to program content, its length, mandatory participation, education about its legal impact, and collaboration with other professionals. Although all of the parents were able to identify aspects of the program that provided benefits to them, some also provided suggestions for improvement.

#### ***Subtheme 1: Program Length***

Three of the parents believed the program should have been longer and/or should have included post-completion check-ins. Bri thought it would have been a “huge plus” for her if the program were longer. She felt like she did not have enough time to cover everything she wanted to address and would have appreciated more time to go deeper into the materials. Jane found

working through the parent workbook was helpful but having time afterward to apply what she learned would have been better. For example, she felt she and her coparent did a fantastic job of communicating during the joint parent session but would have appreciated more time to practice the new skills and commit them to memory. Ron reflected it would have been valuable to be able to go back and revisit some of the homework assignments. He suggested an online refresher with a focus on the skills learned during the program would be particularly useful.

### ***Subtheme 2: Program Content***

Two of the parents suggested including more specific content would have been helpful to the program. Jane liked learning new skills, like how to respond to hostile emails and text messages but would have appreciated learning how to manage issues more unique to her situation. She noted that since “conflict resolution is such a big topic and concept,” the program’s benefits could be expanded if the homework had been more detailed. Likewise, Bobby described how there were topics in the program that he and his coparent could not relate to. He explained that since they were several years down the road from being divorced, bringing in the topics to be a “little bit tighter” [more specific] would have been more helpful. He shared that he and his coparent were experiencing unique issues with their adolescent children related to social media and technology use that were not addressed in the program, such as “with time on screens or gaming.”

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### ***Subtheme 3: Participation of Both Parents***

For the three parents who participated in session six without their coparent, they perceived their coparent's absence to leave a gap in the program's effectiveness. Bri shared that not being able to practice what she was learning with her coparent was the least helpful aspect of the entire program. She thought it would have benefited the coparenting relationship for both of them to learn and practice the same skills. Because of this missed opportunity, she reiterated several times in the interview that she thought this program should be a required course, or at least readily available, for all divorcing couples with children. She recognized, however, that in many coparenting situations, the parents are unable to be in the same room together. Despite this, since a substantial portion of the program is individual work, she did not think a coparent refusing to participate should be an obstacle for parents who want to take the course alone. Ron also felt disappointed because his coparent did not participate in the program. Although he liked all of the learning, he thought session six was the least useful because they were not able to discuss the new skills he had learned. He also shared that since he and his coparent had already been involved with the courts, he had already learned some of the materials in session six. In contrast to Ron, Ryan and his coparent participated in the individual coaching/counseling portion of the program at the same time, similar to Ron, he and his coparent did not complete session six together. Ryan reported feeling disappointed that his coparent refused to meet with him for the

meeting designed for both parents. He believed her unwillingness to participate the joint parent session limited the program's effectiveness and therefore prevented them from coming together as coparents for their children.

#### ***Subtheme 4: Education About Legal Impact***

In response to the request for recommendations for family court professionals, five of the parents stated they did not have any. However, three hoped for more support concerning the legal impact of their participation. Two parents wished they would have had more backing from the program in learning about their various legal options. Bri shared that she had already gone through the court system during a previous divorce, and she never knew any of these programs existed until her second divorce. She reflected it would have been helpful to know more about how the program impacted her legal case before she spent money and put in the time. Ron, too, thought it would be useful to connect the program to his legal options. He explained that it would be helpful for divorcing parents to be informed of options related to program participation that would impact the legal side. He thought education about making better use of his attorney would have been helpful:

So, I think trying to tie it to the legal system, not for using it as a weapon or weaponizing—nothing like that—but to help me try to figure out how to make better use of my attorney time and not spend so much money. If it were not for my attorney's awareness of this program, I mean, clearly, I wouldn't know anything about it. I had to check my own expectations, like during the program to say, "Oh, I'm not really figuring out how I could connect this to saving money on the legal side." My recommendation would be to somehow raise awareness that this kind of stuff is available.

Jane also would have liked more information from the program about how to use what she was learning to effectively interact with the legal system. She described how frustrating it had been for her to spend so much money and how discouraged she felt with the prohibitive cost of legal representation. Jane explained:

It's frustrating the amount of money that is involved in making these things come to fruition. And you know the clients are spending a lot of money and time away from their children, and so...I've learned that that's just the norm.

#### ***Subtheme 5: Collaboration With Other Professionals***

Trish was the only parent to mention bringing in other professionals. She suggested it would have been helpful to her if there were more open lines of communication with the other treating professionals:

I wanted more communication with, like, previous therapists that either the child or parent had seen. Or collaboration of bringing the therapists together with the parenting coach. I just felt like there were so many different pieces and it was hard to bring it all together because there kept being more pieces added to everything. I know that would be so hard to bring everything together, though, all those people. It may have been a very busy time, following the end of COVID.

#### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the results of the present study using descriptions of what eight parents' found meaningful from their participation in the NWFF program. All of the parents reported aspects of the program that were helpful, which suggests the program is useful for the intended population, though some indicated there was room for improvement. Three overarching

themes and twelve subthemes materialized from data analysis which will be discussed in-depth in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to obtain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of parents who participated in and completed a targeted intervention for high-conflict separated or divorced court-connected families, specifically the NWFF program. From the perspective of prevention science, interventions grounded in theory (i.e., evidence-based) and rigorously studied (i.e., evidence consistently demonstrating positive effects on intended outcomes) are expected to have the largest practical impact (O'Hara et al., 2021; Sandler et al., 2013). This chapter presents an interpretation of how the findings compare to research on similar topics as well as how the results are relevant to the guiding theoretical frameworks. It concludes with a discussion of the study's implications for a clinical setting and future considerations for practitioners who utilize this particular program.

#### **Interpretation and Comparison of Findings to Existing Literature**

First, the results of this qualitative research study demonstrate perceived benefits to all of the parents who participated in and completed the NWFF program. These findings are consistent with other studies demonstrating that divorce education programs are beneficial for court-involved families, especially those programs that provide parents with education about high-quality coparenting and teach applicable skills (Moran et al., 2019). Three main themes were developed from the study's findings.

#### **Theme 1: Family Relationships**

As previously discussed, all of the parents expressed varying hopes for improving relationships going into the NWFF program. Some of the parents wanted to learn ways to improve the coparenting relationship, whereas others were more concerned with repairing

relationships with their children. This expectation is congruent with the NWFF program's aim of helping parents and children adjust to "new ways" of reorganization following a separation or divorce (Eddy, 2009a), and is supported by research linking the quality of coparenting to enhanced family functioning (Nunes et al., 2021). Although coparenting requirements can vary from state to state, separated or divorced parents are typically encouraged to remain involved with each other through coparenting. Additionally, the participants' expectations for the program appear to indicate the referral sources (i.e., the attorneys) understood the purpose and utility of the program and were able to advise their clients accordingly. Thus, an important takeaway from the present study is the critical role of providing the courts and the attorneys with an option that promotes coparenting and parent-child well-being, which then can be presented to parents who are dissolving their relationship.

### ***Subtheme 1: Improving the Coparenting Relationship***

A primary goal reported by almost all of the parents was learning skills to develop a functional coparenting relationship. Although improving coparenting is not a stated aim of the program, it does appear to be implied that, as a result of learning new skills, coparenting interactions will improve. For example, in the *Professional Guidebook*, Eddy (2009a) emphasizes, "these skills aren't parenting skills per se, although they improve parenting, but are rather key conflict resolution or conflict management skills" (p. 18). This supports the systemic approach predicting that improvements in coparenting will lead to benefits to the parent-child relationships. Helping parents with their coparenting challenges is supported by extensive and long-standing research, which demonstrates ineffective coparenting is associated with maladaptive outcomes for children (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Amato & Keith, 1991; Becher et al., 2019; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Davies et al., 2015; Deutsch et al., 2017; Deutsch &

Pruett, 2009; Emery, 1999; Ferraro et al., 2016; Grych, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston et al., 2009; Modecki et al., 2014; Sandler et al., 2008; Sandler et al., 2013; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). Such research, as a result, indicates the quality of the coparenting relationship is significantly associated with the children's adjustment (Nunes et al., 2021; O'Hara et al., 2021; Steinbach, 2023). To this end, teaching dual-household parents or caregivers skills to interact effectively would be an important strategy for any intervention designed to protect children and parents from divorce-related conflict.

A number of parents thought learning communication skills would be the solution to improving their relationships with their ex-partners. This is not surprising considering one of the characteristics of high-conflict coparenting is an inability to effectively communicate (Anderson et al., 2011; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Choi et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2012; Malcore et al., 2010; Polak & Saini, 2019; Warmuth et al., 2020). Thus, teaching coparenting communication skills is a common objective of numerous post-divorce parenting education programs (Choi et al., 2019; Nunes et al., 2021; O'Hara et al., 2021). Promisingly, despite five reports of unchanged conflict levels in the coparenting relationship, all eight participants did report an increased ability to communicate more effectively, even if the perceived benefit was their own skill development. This is in line with a meta-analysis conducted by Hawkins et al. (2012), who find working on communication skills leads to more effective outcomes than focusing on knowledge alone. Teaching parents how to communicate with each other supports the program's goal of empowering parents to make their own decisions about their children's care and upbringing while relying less on family court professionals to do that for them (Eddy, 2009a). Outside of NWFF, encouraging parents to make their own divorce-related decisions is an important aspect of other coparenting programs, too, designed to reduce conflict, improve

communication, and reduce the risk for children who experience parental separation or divorce. For example, as reported by O'Hara et al. (2021), The Family Transitions Guide program helps parents identify what they need to do for the benefit of their children and explore strategies to make that happen. These findings, combined with the reports of the interviewed parents, suggest that dual-household parents may feel motivated to learn new ways of coping if they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own roles in behavior and decision-making.

Several of the parents hoped participation in the program would help them and their coparent learn how to effectively work as a team. This type of collaboration is encouraged to help parents put aside their conflict to focus on their children's needs (McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Warmuth et al., 2020) and is important for family well-being and child outcomes (Becher et al., 2019). In a recent study conducted by Karberg and Cabrera (2020b), their findings emphasize that when a parental breakup occurs, the ability to develop a cooperative coparenting partnership is crucial to the children's healthy social adjustment. A cooperative approach is understood to be a crucial focus of the NWFF program, as described by Eddy (2009a) as an interdisciplinary approach involving all professionals inside or outside the court process.

As previously emphasized, there is strong evidence that parents who support each other's roles as effective caregivers (i.e., provide coparenting support) have children who demonstrate fewer behavioral difficulties (Feinberg et al., 2007; Karberg & Cabrera, 2020b; Murphy et al., 2016). One participant thought a collaborative approach should extend to all treating professionals. This view is endorsed by other researchers who encourage a systemic approach when working with high-conflict families to include all professionals and nonprofessionals who maintain relationships with the family (Sullivan, 2019). A similar view is also supported by

Pruett et al. (2021), who indicate that wraparound services are useful for the assessment of conflict levels and parental stability during relationship dissolution.

Two of the participants, both of whom partook in the program without their ex-partner, specifically identified reducing stressful interactions with their coparent as an expectation of the program. This would be anticipated as it is not uncommon for dual-household parents to feel tension and life stress (Choi et al., 2019; Schramm et al., 2018). Promisingly, both parents reported less stress and lower levels of conflict post-completion, which is congruent with the program's goal of reducing adversarial pressure (Eddy, 2009a). This is also consistent with research elsewhere demonstrating that parents find it helpful to learn stress-management strategies (Fagen & Lee, 2014; Schramm et al., 2018).

Some of the participants expressed the belief that improvements in coparenting would occur if their coparent learned how to change, an expectation that clashes with the program's focus on individual growth (Eddy, 2009a). According to Eddy (2009b), instead of trying to change an ex-spouse or label one parent as the problem, it's essential for each parent to learn skills that improve individual coping and promote effective interaction. This view encourages both self-reflection and individual behavior changes that can lead to helpful behavior change and improved well-being. In further support of individual growth and skill development is the opportunity for high-conflict parents with abuse and violence allegations to safely participate in the program with little to no direct contact with an offending ex-partner (Eddy, 2009a). This helps prevent hostile encounters and protects a victim parent from an offending parent (Eddy, 2009a). Safeguarding each client's physical safety is identified in the literature elsewhere as first on the list of items to address and as a result, despite the apparent benefits of joint parent

meetings, there may be times when it is best not to meet with the parents together (Lebow, 2019).

At the time of the interviews, some of the parents reported that positive changes to behaviors were made during the program but those changes did not persist, and the coparenting and/or parent-child relationship declined in quality following program completion. Researchers in a Becher et al. (2019) study of a coparenting education program found at a post-study 3-month follow-up that improvements to the coparenting alliance and prosocial behaviors of the participants had declined as well. This is congruent with the present study in which two participants reported observing their coparent behave positively during the joint parent meetings but did not see those positive behaviors used outside of the coach's office. The finding of unsustainable change, however, contradicts research by Owen and Rhoades (2012), who discovered that parents who completed the Working Together Program showed a decrease in coparenting conflict at a 2-month follow-up. It is worth pointing out, however, that for both of the studies mentioned above, the follow-up was a uniform 2 months and 3 months, while this was not the case for the present study. One possible interpretation for this could be explained by the variability in follow-up times. At the time of the interviews, data from the demographic questionnaire reflected program completion times ranging from "a few weeks" to "6 months," though one interviewee reported during the interview that he had completed the program "a couple of years ago," contradicting his answer on the questionnaire. Another interpretation could be related to changes in perceptions of coparenting effectiveness. It is possible that the NWFF program created new ideas about what a healthy coparenting relationship looks like, which could inflate expectations and cause participants to see their coparent's behavior as more negative than before. This could suggest a need to make certain the NWFF coaches/counselors emphasize

realistic expectations, particularly for those parents who complete the program without their ex-partner.

### ***Subtheme 2: Improving the Parent-Child Relationship***

Several of the parents identified specific goals for the parent-child relationship, including restoring/repairing the relationship and reducing their child's hostility toward them. This aim supports the program's emphasis on parent-child therapy. According to Eddy (2009a), it is important to treat the parent and the child together, rather than separately. This view aligns with research elsewhere that individual therapy for only the child is often ineffective because focusing on the child alone will have little impact on difficulties stemming from interactions between the parent and child or between the parents (Lebow, 2019). As a result, the aim of the parent-child sessions is to give parents an opportunity to teach their children the same four skills they've learned in the previous six sessions. In joint meetings with their children, the parents are coached to discuss the "new ways" of family functioning and to respond to the child's separation or divorce-related concerns in a supportive manner. This portion of the program is designed specifically to help the parents listen carefully to their child's divorce-related feelings and concerns (Eddy, 2009b). In a study conducted by Stokkebekk et al. (2019) on children's coping with divorce, findings demonstrated that although most children believed sharing their concerns was helpful, many found it difficult to initiate those conversations. The adolescents, in particular, preferred discussing their concerns with someone neutral.

Interestingly, the notion of giving children a voice in divorce proceedings is a relatively recent development, contrasting the traditional view that children do not have the ability to participate in family law matters (Hayes & Birnbaum, 2020; Kelly, 2012; Morrow & Richards, 1996). The assumption has been that if children were not given a say in divorce-related decision-

making, they would be protected from becoming involved in the turmoil of their parents' relationship breakdown (Hayes & Birnbaum, 2020; Smart, 2002). A similar belief has been that divorcing parents know what is best for their children, and, therefore, the children's views will be sufficiently represented by their parents (Hayes & Birnbaum, 2020). These views, however, contradict the NWFF program's aim of helping parents to hear their children's divorce-related concerns (Eddy, 2009b). Currently, research emphasizes that children should be allowed to have a voice in decisions that will impact their lives (Hayes & Birnbaum, 2020); such support can then encourage the development of critical skills that guard emotionally against divorce-related issues (Greenberg, 2019).

The parents' responses were varied with respect to what they perceived as useful from the joint sessions with their child. One parent shared that the communication between her and her teenager improved as a result of the joint meetings, while three others mentioned opportunities to see and hear their respective child's perspectives as beneficial to their relationship. These findings implicate that the structured counseling and psychoeducational aspects of the program can lead to teachable moments that allow both the parent and child to improve their relationship. Preservation of the parent-child relationship, particularly during adolescence, is important to the healthy socioemotional development of children (Reese, 2018), even more so since complaints of alienation and parent-child contact problems have been on the rise in the family courts (Polak, 2020).

Along similar lines, some of the parents hoped the program could give them an opportunity to minimize hostility with their children to avoid becoming further estranged. Out of the four participants who took part with their children, only one of the participants described their child as hostile post-program completion, while this was not the case with the other three.



These results indicate the importance of programs for parents and children that prevent the deterioration of a parent-child relationship, a finding that supports the value of the parent-child sessions offered in the present program. Promisingly, the NWFF program has been recognized as an appropriate program to promote coping and conflict-reducing skills to parents and their children (Warshak, 2020).

## **Theme 2: What Parents Found Helpful**

The initial evaluation of the NWFF program indicates the parents were satisfied with their experiences with the program and could identify benefits from participating. This outcome supports the available literature on divorce education programs that imply usefulness in promoting beneficial outcomes for separated or divorced families (Nunes et al., 2021; Schramm & Becher, 2020).

### ***Subtheme 1: Individual Meetings***

As discussed in the previous chapter, all of the parents reported benefits from the individual counseling/coaching sessions. These benefits were most often associated with increased self-awareness and learning new strategies for communication using specific techniques such as BIFF and Making Proposals (Eddy, 2009b, 2011, 2014). This part of the curriculum appears to be helpful in providing emotional support to the parents while they learn new communication and behavioral skills, strategies that are identified as learning objectives of numerous programs for dual-household parents (Butler et al., 2020; Nunes et al., 2021). This is in line with the aim of the NWFF program as explained by Eddy (2009a), who states, “They need new skills first, before they can heal the divorce or address past bad behavior productively” (p. 14).

In addition to learning new ways to communicate, identifying strategies that help parents manage their emotions is also important. This appears to be a significant benefit from the individual format. For example, if a parent struggles to manage their angry feelings, it might be helpful to address this issue in an individual format separate from the other parent or the child. Once the parent has learned sufficient anger management skills, it would likely be emotionally safer to meet with the other parent or the child. Learning emotional regulation strategies is a commonly cited outcome of participating in a parenting program (Butler et al., 2020) and supports the program's goal of parents learning managed emotions and moderate behaviors and then teaching their children those same skills (Eddy, 2009a). The opportunity to learn new skills in an individual format is a useful aspect of the program and may be helpful for high-conflict coparents who lack the communication and behavioral skills to interact with their ex-partner in a productive manner.

### ***Subtheme 2: Homework Assignments in Parent Workbook***

This subtheme is related to program content. According to Eddy (2009b), the homework in the parent workbook provides a straightforward way to begin discussions and reinforce learning. The workbook can be used individually or jointly but provides an outline to the coach or counselor that is helpful in keeping the participants on track. By far, the most reported benefits came from insights that occurred as a result of completing the homework assignments in the parent workbook. All the parents were able to identify aspects of the homework deemed to be helpful during and after program completion. Two specifically identified the Making Proposals (Eddy, 2009b) assignment as especially valuable in reducing conflict with their coparent, material that focuses on “*Who does What, When, and Where,*” and is designed to decrease the likelihood of parents digressing into the past so they can instead create options for the future

(Eddy, 2009b). In a meta-analysis by Miller-Graff et al. (2016), results demonstrate that a combination of psychoeducation and skills training generates the largest positive effects on the coparenting relationship. Thus, it appears significant to note that communication and skills training are complementary aspects of successful parent divorce intervention programs.

Most of the participants reported increased understanding and/or self-awareness as a positive gain from the homework assignments. According to Eddy (2009a, 2016), the inability to see one's own contribution to conflict is a common problem in high-conflict family situations. As a result, high-conflict people become stuck in self-defeating patterns of blame and denial that prevent them from seeing their part in the situation (Eddy & Lomax, 2021). This perspective suggests that developing a more functional parenting relationship requires each parent to take responsibility and be accountable for improving their individual behaviors and parenting skills (Polak, 2020). When a person is aware of both their emotions and logical thoughts, they are more likely to behave effectively.

### ***Subtheme 3: Practitioner Support***

All of the parents described their coach/counselor as helpful to them in some manner. Several parents described the practitioner as “neutral,” “fair,” or “objective,” which appears to indicate the coach/counselor had the necessary skills to avoid becoming “emotionally hooked” (Eddy, 2009a, p. 110) by the parents’ strong emotions. Overall, the participants’ perceptions of their experiences with their coaches/counselors signify that despite feeling challenged at times, the parents felt accepted and understood—factors associated with the development of a secure relationship (Bowlby, 1969; Reese, 2018). The ability of the practitioner to intervene with families in a supportive manner is a reported objective of numerous family dispute resolution programs (Pruett et al., 2021) and is identified as a significant aspect in influencing perceptions

of procedural justice (Howieson, 2023). Considering all of these parents were referred to the program as a result of litigation processes, the case for positive support appears to be significant. In a qualitative study conducted by Jamison et al., (2014), results demonstrated that parents who felt positively supported had improved their management of negative emotions. As related to the NWFF program, it appears the development of rapport between the practitioner and the parents likely influenced the parents' perceptions of outcomes. This positive alliance, reported elsewhere in other studies, is a significant strategy linked to effective family interventions (Howieson, 2023; Lebow, 2019; Norcross & Lambert, 2014).

This also demonstrates the importance of the counselors themselves since a non-adversarial working relationship with the coach/counselor can influence the effectiveness of the program. This supports the program developer's belief that the success of the program relies primarily on the skill of the practitioners who facilitate it (Eddy, 2009a). In the *Professional Guidebook*, Eddy (2009a) emphasizes that for the treating professional (e.g., coach, counselor, parenting coordinator, etc.) to be effective, all should have a shared knowledge of the NWFF method and a collective attitude of support for the clients. The view that court-connected mental health professionals should receive specialized training is supported in the literature elsewhere. For instance, Greenberg and Gould (2001) suggest that just as a complicated medical problem often requires specialized treatment, complicated divorce cases involving children are likely to need a treating professional with specialized training. This view supports the program developer's recommendation that the coaches and counselors are properly trained by the High Conflict Institute trainers, as the NWFF method is only as effective as the "skill of the practitioners who use it" (Eddy, 2009a, p. 119).

#### ***Subtheme 4: Joint Parent Sessions***

The last session of the program can be a joint session with both parents together if it appears it would be helpful (Eddy, 2009b). This meeting is not therapy but is designed to improve the effective functioning of the parents together as a team. Out of the eight parents, five engaged in session six with their coparent with varying levels of success. All five described the joint parent meeting as beneficial at the time of program participation, which is consistent with outcomes from other programs designed to help parents learn to constructively work together to raise their children (Karberg & Cabrera, 2020a). However, at the time of the interview, three of those five, despite believing progress had been made at the time of program participation, described there was no change to the conflict in the coparenting relationship post-program completion.

It appears that separated or divorced parents can provide their children with the best chance at successful adaptation if both parents fully understand the challenges their children face when transitioning between homes. This understanding could improve parents' motivation for coparenting cooperation and potentially prevent future post-divorce conflict, but only if both parents are equally invested. According to Eddy (2009b), meeting with both parents appears to be productive for most families, with the exception of extremely high-conflict cases, which would need to be kept separate for safety reasons.

#### ***Subtheme 5: Parent-Child Sessions***

An important aspect of the program is the parent-child sessions. As most parents are protective of their relationships with their children, it would make sense for them to hope for benefits from the sessions with their children. As explained by Eddy (2009b), the parents are coached on how to teach their children the same new skills they themselves have learned in their

individual meetings with their own coaches; the overarching goal is for the parents to be able provide emotional support in order to help their children feel comfortable enough to express their concerns. The parents who participated in this part of the program discussed how their children were able to share their thoughts and feelings with them in productive ways, which can play an important role in shaping the dynamics between parents and their children. Teaching children skills to cope with divorce-related problems is an important goal in many programs designed for binuclear families, supported by the belief that skills-building applies not just to the family system but to the children's peer relationships and overall adjustment as well (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). It would make sense, then, that if children are taught to problem-solve, they would be better equipped to cope with separation or divorce-related problems as well as scenarios outside of those circumstances.

One parent specifically discussed how she learned to support her child's ability to interact with the other parent more effectively. Her support made a difference in the child's willingness to engage in the parent-child session with the father. This is in line with research on children's suggestibility and the influence that parents can exert on parent-child relationships (Murphy et al., 2016).

### **Theme 3: Suggestions for Program Improvement**

First, it is important to note that divorce-related conflict is different for every family, so it would be unreasonable to expect any one program to capture all of the difficulties associated with each family's unique situation. Five subthemes were developed related to the parents' suggestions for program improvement: making the program longer, expanding the program's content, requiring both parents to participate, providing education about the legal impacts of participation, and encouraging collaboration with other professionals.

### ***Subtheme 1: Extend Program Length***

A common suggestion was to extend the length of the program by adding time at the end of each session and/or including post-completion follow-ups. To review, the NWFF program is limited to five individual counseling/coaching sessions with a confidential coach/counselor utilizing the parent workbook. The sixth and final session can be completed individually, or it can include both parties and both coaches together. The program concludes after the sixth session unless the parents advance to the parent-child sessions. For this sample, four of the participants reported program completion after the initial six sessions and four went on to participate in the parent-child sessions. Out of the four parents who thought the program should have been longer, two partook in the parent-child sessions and two did not. The suggestion to extend program length indicates an expectation of additional support beyond the planned length of the curriculum. This expectation, however, is inconsistent with the program objective of providing a short-term method for parents reorganizing due to a separation or divorce. According to Eddy (2009a), the NWFF program is specifically designed to teach parents key skills in a brief period of time. A shorter approach is supported by literature elsewhere with results demonstrating that brief programs can exert a positive impact (Schramm & Becher, 2020; Schramm et al., 2018). Similarly, in an evaluation conducted by O'Hara et al. (2021), findings suggest that a short, motivationally based court-ordered program can promote positive child well-being and reduce potential relitigation by high-conflict families. It should be noted, however, that while the NWFF program is structured to be brief, the participant may return to the coach/counselor in the future, either voluntarily or by a court order (Eddy, 2009a). It appears that post-program meetings, however, may not have been presented as an option to the parents who made this suggestion. For the parents who completed the parent-child sessions, a potential reason

for hopes of a longer program could be the time it takes to build an effective working relationship with an oppositional child, particularly a teenager. Another possible reason previously discussed but worth mentioning again is participant motivation. It would make sense that parents motivated to improve their relationship with their children would prefer a longer program. In support of longer programs, both Blaisure and Geasler (2000) and Salem et al. (2013) regard high-conflict coparents as a unique group of caregivers who will need ongoing support and exposure to behavioral health interventions.

### ***Subtheme 2: Expand Program Content***

The way in which some of the participants utilized what they learned from the program varied but reports were relatively consistent. Some thought the homework assignments were too broad and did not apply to their respective family's situation, for example, and so they judged more opportunities to address issues unique to their families would have been helpful. This feedback is similar to observations made by participants in a study conducted by Choi et al. (2019), in which participants thought having more detailed information about how to handle certain emotions and what coping skills to use based on each child's age would be beneficial. Another study by Pruett et al. (2021) reported similar experiences from participants who believed a parenting education class should cater more to individual needs with respect to dealing with ongoing partner conflict. However, keeping the content broad is a purposeful goal of the NWFF program. As explained by Eddy (2009a), the homework in the parent workbooks could appear too easy and overly general but the assignments are not designed to be a comprehensive coparenting course, merely an opportunity to learn new basic skills. Yet, if the parents choose to expand their discussions to other topics, this is not prohibited. Eddy (2009a) emphasizes that the



workbook is designed to help the parents meet their goals, but “not to limit their discussions while working on these goals” (p. 49).

### ***Subtheme 3: Require Participation of Both Parents***

Two parents completed the entire program without the involvement of their coparent, and one participant’s coparent participated in the individual sessions but did not attend the joint session. All three reported they believed the program would have been more useful to them if their ex-partner had participated in the joint session, leading to the view that in order to fully benefit from the NWFF program, the active involvement of both parents is essential. This is supported by other divorce researchers, who emphasize the participation of both parents is crucial not only to program effectiveness but also to changing the family dynamics (Becher et al., 2019; Cookston et al., 2007; Nunes et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2015). However, in some instances, putting both parents together in the same room is not an option due to concerns for physical, or even psychological, safety. Based on the reports of the parents who were interviewed and their initial hopes for improved coparenting, it did not appear this particular sample was comprised of parents with domestic abuse allegations.

### ***Subtheme 4: Provide Insight Into Legal Impact***

Five of the parents stated they could not think of recommendations for the family court professionals. However, three of the parents reported they would have appreciated learning more about the legal impacts of their participation, such as how their involvement affected them financially as well as in court. Although specific education about the legal impact of participation could not be found in the NWFF literature, the *Professional Guidebook* does indicate that participation can help parents to prepare for highly contested hearings or mediation (Eddy, 2009a). These same parents also mentioned they would have appreciated knowing about the

NWFF program earlier on in the separation/divorce or litigation process. The notion of early intervention with high-conflict separated or divorced families is not a new concept in the divorce literature and has been promoted by more than one prevention scientist in the scholarly literature (Bala & Slabach, 2019; Marcus, 2020), so this finding is not surprising.

#### ***Subtheme 5: Collaboration With Other Professionals***

Although only one parent specifically suggested including other treating professionals (i.e., individual therapists for parents/children, etc.) in the program, this subtheme seemed noteworthy to briefly discuss based on evidence from abundant research indicating the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration when working with court-connected families (Greenberg et al., 2019; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Marcus, 2020; Sullivan, 2019; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001). The parent who made this recommendation participated with her coparent as well as her children, and, as previously mentioned, suggested that including all of the treating professionals would have been helpful to her family at the time. A collaborative team would ideally include all of the professionals as well as nonprofessionals who have working relationships with the family, which could be particularly important for families with minimal resources and major needs (Sullivan, 2019). Taking into consideration the significant impact of the treating professional, seeking formal training is encouraged in order to ensure the coaches/counselors are equipped with the necessary skills to competently guide parents and children through the program.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study conceptualized divorce education programs within a theoretical context. Several theories were used to guide the research and make sense of the findings: family systems

theory, social learning theory, and polyvagal theory. These theories are discussed in-depth in Chapter 2.

### **Family Systems Theory**

This study's focus is primarily on parents and their influence on each other as well as their children, which supports the use of family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) as a relevant paradigm for exploration. According to family systems theorists, the family is an inextricably interconnected system in which the beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of one person impact the feelings and behaviors of the entire family (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). This view highlights the NWFF program's focus on working with all members of the family in different combinations for the best interest of their children (Eddy, 2009a). The initial intensive work with each parent in the individual sessions seemed to provide the parents with the needed emotional and practical support to encourage healthier ways of coparenting. According to the spill over hypothesis (Engfer, 1988), this is important because the quality of the coparenting relationship can transfer over to impact the condition of the parent-child relationship. This view is supported by social science demonstrating that the coparenting relationship plays a crucial role in the functioning of post-separation or divorce parent-child relationships (Saini, 2019). Thus, it appears that interventions for high-conflict families are likely to be most effective when there are meetings with different combinations of family members in a way that is not just focused on one relationship, but on all of the various family relationships. Toward the importance of mending the quality of the coparenting and parent-child relationships, improving how often and how well family members communicate with each other is another important aspect to explore (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Improving or increasing communication within the coparenting or parent-child relationship was identified as an important goal for nearly all of the parents coming into the

program. For some parents, improved communication was also noted as a beneficial outcome of program participation. Effective communication has been demonstrated to be vital for constructive conflict resolution (Warmuth et al., 2020).

The NWFF program stresses the importance of adjustment to changing circumstances and ultimately maintains a long-term perspective. By incorporating a family systems approach into high-conflict divorce intervention programs, the parents, children, and other significant family members can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of their family system. This knowledge can then empower them to make informed decisions, reduce conflict, and provide a more stable and supportive environment for their children during and after divorce.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory suggests that children learn through observing and modeling the behavior of those around them, particularly their parents. In the context of divorce, children are likely to observe how their parents handle stress, conflict, and emotional distress. When parents demonstrate healthier behaviors, children are more likely to model those behaviors themselves. This view is supported by research demonstrating that coparenting interventions grounded in social learning theory principles have the potential to provide positive benefits to dual-house parents and children (Barlow & Coren, 2018; Butler et al., 2020). This view is congruent with the program's aims of teaching parents new skills that they can then teach their children. For example, in session six of the program, "Learning from Both Parents," the parents are encouraged to remember that their children are learning from them at all times (Eddy, 2009b). Since several of the parents described learning new skills, social learning appears to be an intrinsic objective of the program. As described by Eddy (2009b), providing parents with an opportunity to teach their children without relying on professionals to do it for them is an

important part of helping parents to support each other in the new family structure. For example, in the first session of parent-child counseling, the parents are coached to “Teach Your Child Skills for Resiliency” (p. 43), which includes the same skills the parents are taught in their individual parent sessions. These teaching sessions create an environment for the parents to not only teach but reinforce positive coping skills, which can ultimately contribute to a more caring and supportive post-divorce environment for the family.

As previously stressed throughout this paper, children in high-conflict divorce situations often witness intense arguments, hostility, and negative interactions between their parents. According to social learning theory, these experiences can shape children’s beliefs about relationships, communication, and conflict resolution. They may learn aggressive or avoidant coping mechanisms as they observe their parents’ behaviors, which can create conflict in the parent-child relationships as well. This is significant due to research indicating that children’s interactions with their parents are positively associated with their own ability to adaptively cope with their parent’s divorce (Afifi et al., 2006). Children may also internalize these coping mechanisms. If they observe one parent using emotional withdrawal as a way to cope with stress, they may be more likely to use this strategy as a coping mechanism themselves when faced with similar stressors. Social learning theory reminds us, too, that not only do children learn from their parents, but they also learn from their peer groups. Children exposed to high-conflict co-parenting may also seek out peers who exhibit similar conflict-prone behaviors, which can further reinforce their own negative tendencies. Therefore, addressing conflict in the co-parenting relationship can have ripple effects on a child's socialization in and outside of the family.

Conversely, social learning principles would suggest that children learning constructive conflict-resolution skills from parents can be incredibly beneficial to children. For example, if parents demonstrate good communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills in their interactions with each other, their children are more likely to adopt these skills as well. Also important to consider is how children learn emotional management by observing how their parents handle their own feelings. Parents who model healthy emotional expression and regulation can help children develop these essential skills, too, which could lead to improved emotional intelligence and better interpersonal relationships. These views support the parent-child counseling portion of the curriculum that highlights the importance of teaching parents skills that minimize the opportunity for conflict while maximizing opportunities for cooperation. For example, in session two of the NWFF program, “Calming Upset Emotions” (p. 5), the parents are taught the BIFF strategy as a non-adversarial way to respond to an angry coparent. The point is to avoid triggering defensiveness and keep the dialog focused on problem-solving information (Eddy, 2011).

In review, coparents who demonstrate constructive conflict resolution strategies, such as compromise, active listening, and finding win-win solutions, can be better equipped to provide their children with the tools they need to handle conflicts in a healthy and non-destructive manner. Supported by numerous studies, the results of teaching parents constructive conflict resolution skills indicate that prosocial parenting practices are beneficial for parents and children alike (Choi & Becher, 2018; Sandler et al., 2013; Warmuth et al., 2020).

### **Polyvagal Theory**

A polyvagal perspective highlights the hierarchical relationship among different aspects of the autonomic nervous system and its role in promoting adaptive behaviors in response to

environmental cues of safety, danger, and life threats (Porges, 2011, 2021). Key to this theory is the subjective perception of safety (Porges, 1995). Although the parents were not asked specifically if they felt safe during the program, considering the positive reports of learning, it appears the autonomic need to learn and function in a safe environment was adequately met. Seen through a polyvagal lens, without a feeling of safety, the parents would not have been able to access the parts of their brain required for logical thinking and problem-solving. It is reasonable to assume that if a parent or child feels safe and supported, they families are more likely to think clearly, make rational decisions, and engage in effective problem-solving. In light of the parents' reports of positive experiences with their coach, as well as the existing literature stressing the importance of the therapeutic alliance, the polyvagal approach appears to support the usefulness of parents and children learning new skills toward the creation of a climate of safety.

In contrast to feeling safe, when people feel consistently stressed or threatened, they may be more likely to adopt defensive behaviors (i.e., fight/flight or immobilization responses) to protect themselves (Porges, 1995). Through the lens of polyvagal theory, these defensive responses are natural and instinctive adaptations to real or perceived threats of physical, emotional, or psychological danger. As related to high-conflict court-connected families, a defensive response can trigger similar defensive reactions in others, making individuals overly alert and more likely to perceive neutral or ambiguous cues as threats (Porges, 2011). The tendency to be hypervigilant in a litigation context is explored by Bailey et al. (2020), who emphasize it is not uncommon for parents and children involved in lengthy legal conflicts to grow increasingly hyper-alert and hyper-vigilant toward one another due to an internal sense of not feeling safe. This perspective aligns with the fact that high-conflict families have been shown

to demonstrate high degrees of anger and mistrust, ongoing difficulties in communicating about and the care of the children, frequent incidents of verbal abuse, and high rates of litigation and relitigation (Johnston et al., 2009). According to Eddy (2009a), it is important to intervene early with high-conflict coparents using a skills-focused program because these families lack the constructive conflict skills to manage their behaviors when they are feeling defensive. Without the perspective of polyvagal theory, these adaptive survival responses may be misinterpreted by the courts as voluntary acts of “non-compliance, resistance, or disinterest (Bailey et al., 2020).

The importance of promoting emotional and physiological well-being for families receiving court-connected services is congruent with the work of clinical psychiatrist Dr. Dan Siegel (1999), who notes that when someone can effectively cope with and respond to life’s stressors and challenges, they are functioning in the “window of tolerance.” In the context of divorcing families, the window of tolerance can be a useful concept to consider because divorce is a highly stressful and emotionally charged process that can affect all family members. Divorcing parents and their children alike may experience a wide range of emotions, including anger, sadness, fear, and confusion. By learning skills that will help them remain in their window of tolerance, they will be able to manage these emotions more effectively and avoid becoming overwhelmed.

### **Clinical and Research Implications**

First and foremost, the results of this study indicated that parents reported benefits from participating in the NWFF program. Overwhelmingly, the parents reported learning new skills (e.g., BIFF, Making Proposals) that were perceived to improve their ability to effectively coparent. These results supported the fundamental objectives of the program (e.g., helping parents immediately learn new skills by strengthening flexible thinking, managing emotions, and



practicing moderate behaviors). Thus, it is worth noting that learning skills related to communication and skill-building appear to be complementary and highlights research elsewhere indicating that coparenting programs that provide psychoeducation combined with skills training on problem-solving are the most beneficial (Miller-Graff et al., 2016). At the same time, other objectives of the program were not fully accomplished (e.g., immunizing families against becoming high-conflict families, strengthening both parents' abilities to make parenting decisions) or were not explored due to inadequate information (e.g., alienation, abuse, domestic violence). With respect to some of the parents disappointment that their goals were not achieved, potential reasons could include unresolved conflict between the parents that hindered their ability to fully engage in the program as well as unresolved emotional issues that made it challenging to achieve specific goals. If there are unresolved issues such as these, it could be difficult to implement the skills and techniques learned in co-parenting education. Additionally, some of the parents appeared to struggle with follow-through, indicating that more practice with implementing the skills they've learned might have been helpful.

For all parents, this program appeared to provide a powerful framework for creating change in the coparenting relationship, even for those parents who completed without the added benefit of an ex-partner. For the three parents who were unable to complete the joint session with their coparent, all three were still able to acknowledge the benefits of their participation, indicating that psychoeducation and skills training are relevant strategies for improving family well-being. The view of focusing on learning new skills to better the quality of the coparenting relationship is commonly identified as important in divorce-related literature (Nunes et al., 2021). Taking into consideration that all of the parents wanted to primarily improve their family situation for the benefit of their children, it could be the positive reports were based on first

increasing the parents' awareness of their own contribution to the coparenting conflict and then providing them with an opportunity to constructively work with their coach to create insight and facilitate problem-solving. This insight appeared to come primarily from the individual parent sessions and supports findings elsewhere in which parents express hopes to "be a better parent" (Hartwig et al., 2017, p. 506).

In light of suggestions made by some of the parents to extend the program's length or make the sessions longer, the current study highlights the importance of ongoing support for dual-household parents and children. As has been previously discussed, further research may be required to determine how this can be optimally provided (Barlow & Coren, 2018). Thus, offering a choice of interventions varying in lengths to meet the different needs of high-conflict family systems is likely to be beneficial.

Additional suggestions were made by the parents to tailor the program to meet needs important to the family. However, it could be challenging to strike the necessary balance between program flexibility and structured fidelity, both of which have been previously identified as important (Butler et al., 2020). Thus, developing an intervention program for high-conflict court-involved family systems that offers the necessary flexibility to address the unique needs of the participants while also adhering to the curriculum's program objectives appears to be a crucial element of program success.

Additionally, although it appeared most of the counselors/coaches utilized the parent workbooks, it is unclear if the program was followed the way it was intended. Future researchers may consider gathering information about whether the NWFF providers are adhering to the structure of the program or modifying it, and if that makes a significant difference in program effects. This type of information could be helpful in determining who and what type of family

situations are the most likely to benefit from the NWFF program. Also, gathering longitudinal data to determine how skillful the participants remained following program completion may be valuable, too.

Because this program will continue to educate families experiencing interparental conflict, the current research study has the potential to positively impact future efforts to program improvement. For this reason, continued support, however that manifests, of the program for high-conflict court-connected families is recommended.

### **Study Limitations**

Although this study collected meaningful information, there were several limitations that warrant discussion. First, there was a notable limitation concerning cultural diversity. Because all eight participants identified as white, certain ethnic or racial groups were not represented. This could lead to biased or incomplete conclusions about the program's effectiveness for one population that does not apply to other cultures or the broader population of court-involved families.

Second, the small sample size posed an additional limitation. Despite efforts to attract a larger number of participants, only a small number of individuals expressed interest in being interviewed for the study. It is worth noting that all of the interviewees reported willing participation in the program based on the recommendation of the court or the advice of their attorneys. As a result of participating in the program by choice, as opposed to being court-mandated, these individuals may possess unique qualities related to motivation that skew the characteristics of typical high-conflict coparents. Further, due to the subjective nature of self-report methods, the parents' reports may be less accurate than other more objective measures. Since this study relied on each parent's ability and willingness to truthfully report their

experiences, there is no way to verify the accuracy of the reports. Considering the reliance on data taken from only one member of the family, interviewing both parents and stepparents as well as the participating children could have resulted in different observations.

### **Conclusion**

It is well-documented that high-conflict families involved in the family justice system pose significant challenges to judges, lawyers, and mental health professionals. To overcome these challenges and increase the chances of achieving co-parenting goals, it appears essential for parents to remain committed to the process of cooperative coparenting, seek professional help when needed, and prioritize the well-being of their children. This study provides insight into the perceptions and experiences of parents who participated in and completed a program designed specifically for high-conflict dual-household parents. Overwhelmingly, the participants reported gains in learning, suggesting the program is useful for the intended population. Thus, the results of the present study indicate the NWFF program has practical value and utility for the intended population.

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## APPENDIX A

### HYPOTHETICAL CASE EXAMPLE:

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PARENT-CHILD CONTACT PROBLEM

A father observes his 13-year-old daughter during her mother's parenting time interacting on social media well beyond the time the father considers appropriate to be engaging in the activity a school night. Without stopping to think how his coparent may interpret his request, the father impulsively sends a text message to the mother, insisting that she immediately intervene to limit their daughter's access to social media on school nights. At the same time, the father comments to the mother about how she should do a better job of supervising their daughter during her parenting time. After this, the father sends a message to his daughter, reminding her that he is the one who pays her phone bill and that if she does not immediately comply with his request, he will ground her from her device. The mother, feeling surprised but also unjustly criticized, responds defensively to the father that he does not get to "control her anymore" by setting the rules for how she parents their daughter during her parenting time. The father does not back down but instead doubles down on his request for the mother to implement stricter phone rules on school nights. This time, the father adds a threat to take the mother back to court to obtain "sole custody" of his daughter for their daughter's own protection and safety. In response, the mother, determined to avoid being controlled by her "narcissistic" ex-husband, blocks all contact with the father so he cannot "harass her any further." Without thinking of the emotional impact on her daughter, the mother tearfully shares this information with her, who also begins to feel upset. The mother, however, not realizing the daughter is reacting to her intense feelings, misinterprets the daughter's feelings as a shared fear toward her father and reassures her daughter that if the father follows through on his threat to disconnect her device, the daughter

doesn't need to worry because the mother will manage to come up with the funds to buy her a new device. The daughter, who, prior to this knowledge, simply felt annoyed about the rule she must follow with respect to social media use on school nights, now begins to feel angry with her father for upsetting her mother. The daughter loves her father tremendously, but it hurts her deeply to see her mother (and BFF) so upset. The daughter tries to comfort her mother by telling her that she doesn't blame her for being mad at the father because she agrees with her mother that her father is controlling and narcissistic (even though the daughter isn't quite sure what the word narcissistic means). Consequently, the daughter feels empowered to block her father from contacting her as well. When the father follows through and disconnects the daughter's device, his attempt at maintaining parental authority confirms to the daughter what her mother has previously told her about her father's desire to control "them." Over time, the daughter's attitudes toward her father become increasingly polarized. What was initially an affinity with her mother turns into an alignment with her mother's position against the father. Now, instead of enjoying time spent with her father, she begins to resist being with him. After spending one weekend with the father without her smartphone, the daughter dramatically proclaims to her mother that she would rather "kill herself than spend time with her narcissistic father." The mother, who has not worked through her own unresolved feelings stemming from the ending of her marriage, recalls that when she and the father separated, he pushed her once and yelled at her a couple of times with strong emotion. Since she has witnessed this behavior firsthand, she is convinced that the father is spiraling out of control and not only is he emotionally abusive but is physically dangerous. The mother immediately reaches out to her attorney for guidance. This phone call to her attorney is the catalyst for a temporary protective order filed with the court containing affidavits submitted by the mother and her new boyfriend, providing examples of why

the daughter's mental, physical, and emotional health is being placed at risk should the daughter be forced to have visitation with her father. The Court, wanting to take no chances on placing a minor in harm, issues a restraining order that temporarily restricts the father's access to his daughter. In response, the father hires his own attorney, who has a reputation for being a father's rights advocate and a hard charger in the courtroom, to file a motion for enforcement. The father, still lacking insight into how his abrasive demeanor toward the mother fueled the conflict in the first place, insists to his attorney that the mother has been "alienating" him from his daughter. In response to the father's accusations, the mother tells her attorney, who also has a reputation for being a bulldog in the courtroom, that she has repeatedly encouraged her daughter to go with her father during his parenting time, but since the daughter adamantly refuses, she won't force her to go because the mother is scared the daughter may hurt herself if she is forced to go with her father. As further justification for allowing her daughter to make an adult decision, the mother explains to her attorney that her daughter is extremely mature for her age and with the exception of her relationship with her father, is excelling in all other areas of her life. Unfortunately, the cycle of conflict continues for this family until the parents and the daughter have become so entrenched in their positions that repair for the father-daughter relationship becomes increasingly polarized. After years of filings, hearings, and court-ordered services, the daughter ages out of the system with a new narrative etched in her mind about a father she once adored.

## APPENDIX B

### LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM THE HIGH CONFLICT INSTITUTE



[HighConflictInstitute.com](https://HighConflictInstitute.com)  
[info@highconflictinstitute.com](mailto:info@highconflictinstitute.com)

Main Office  
530 B Street, 17<sup>th</sup> Fl.  
San Diego, CA 92101  
Accounting

7701 E Indian School Rd., Ste F  
Scottsdale, AZ 85251

November 14, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in relation to the dissertation proposal for Robin Watts, M.S., LPC.

We are pleased to be part of this proposal and hereby grant permission for Ms. Watts to advertise requests for interviews for her research project that includes participants experiences with the New Ways for Families® program.

We are happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "M. Hunter", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Megan L. Hunter, CEO

cc: Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., and Susie Rayner, GradDip FDRP

## APPENDIX C

### INITIAL EMAIL TO NWFF PROVIDERS

Dear New Ways for Families providers:

I am emailing you because you are listed as a credentialed *New Ways for Families* provider. I am asking for your help gathering research regarding the participants experiences of the usefulness of the *New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce* curriculum on improving coparenting relationships. This information will be used as part of my research requirement for my doctoral degree at Texas Woman's University. I have the ambitious goal of obtaining responses from parents who have completed this program all over the United States and Canada.

If you have a parent who has completed all six sessions of the NWFF program, I would greatly appreciate it if you would share the below message with them. As a thank you for their participation, eligible participants who agree to be interviewed will receive a free registration for the *New Ways for Families* online 12-class self-paced coparenting education course. Please feel free to share this email with other NWFF providers or organizations who would be willing to forward the below email to their former NWFF clients.

**Here is the message:**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

I am requesting your help for a research study for my doctoral degree from Texas Woman's University. This study will be an investigation of your experience of the usefulness of the *New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce* curriculum. If you think you would like to participate in my study, please click the link below to answer four short questions to determine if you are eligible for my study. This questionnaire will take approximately two to three minutes to complete. If you meet the eligibility criteria for the study and agree to be interviewed, you will

receive a free registration for the *New Ways for Families* online 12-class self-paced coparenting education course. This incentive is provided to you even if you choose not to complete the interview or if you decline to have your information included as part of the study results. You can discontinue answering the questionnaire or withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty or consequence.

#### **4 Question Eligibility Criteria Questionnaire here**

If you qualify for the study, you will be sent one email which will include an **Informed Consent** document, a **Demographic Questionnaire**, and **interview scheduling information**. If you have additional questions about this study, or if you would like to have a copy of the results, please email the Principal Investigator at **insert research email here**.

Thank you for your help with my research project.

Robin Watts, M.S., LPC-S, CFLE

## APPENDIX D

### TEXAS WOMAN’S UNIVERSITY (TWU)

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: The Impact of an Intervention for High-Conflict Court-Involved Dual-Household Family Systems

Principal Investigator: Robin Watts, B.S., M.S. rritchey@twu.edu 940/367-7253

Faculty Advisor: Catherine Dutton, Ph.D. cdutton@twu.edu 940/898-3155

#### Summary and Key Information about the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ms. Robin Watts, a student at Texas Woman’s University, as a part of her dissertation. The purpose of this research is to determine the impact of a parent divorce education skills-training intervention on the quality of the coparenting relationships. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are formerly a participant of the *New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce* (NWFF) program. As a participant, you will be asked to take part in a face-to-face interview regarding your experiences as a participant in this program. This interview will be audio- and video- recorded; a code name will be used to protect your confidentiality. The total time commitment for this study will be about one hour and 30 minutes. Following the completion of the study, you will receive a code for free registration for the *New Ways for Families* online 12-class coparent education course. This course is self-paced and on demand and is being provided to express appreciation for your participation. The greatest risks of this study include potential loss of confidentiality and emotional discomfort. We will discuss these risks and the rest of the study procedures in greater detail below.



Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please review this consent form carefully and take your time deciding whether or not you want to participate. Please feel free to ask the researcher any questions you have about the study at any time.

### Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to spend approximately one hour of your time on a Zoom interview with Robin Watts. An additional time of 30 minutes may be needed to verify information after the interview. Ms. Watts will ask you questions about your participation in the NWFF program and how it impacted your relationships with your coparent and your children. You and Ms. Watts will decide together a date and time for when the interview will happen and a code name for you to use during the interview. The interview will be audio- and video-recorded and written down so Ms. Watts can be accurate when studying what you have said. In order to be a participant in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age or older, speak the English language, share in the duties of raising children under the age of 18 between two homes, and have participated in and completed all six sessions of the *New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce* program.

### Potential Risks

Ms. Watts will ask you questions about how your participation in the NWFF program has affected your relationship with your coparent and your children. A possible risk in this study is discomfort with the questions you are asked. If you become tired or upset, you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview at any time. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your discomfort, Ms. Watts has provided you with a list of resources.

Another risk in this study is the loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will be conducted via Zoom at Ms. Watts' private office. A code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but Ms. Watts will know your real name.

The audio and video recording and the written interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in Ms. Watts' office. Only Ms. Watts and her advisor will hear the audio recording, view the video recording, or read the written interview. The audio and video recordings and the written interview will be destroyed within three years after the study is finished. The signed consent form will be stored separately from all collected information and will be destroyed three years after the study is closed. The results of the study may be reported in scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and internet transactions.

Your audio recording and/or any personal information collected for this study will not be used or distributed for future research even after the researchers remove your personal or identifiable information (e.g., your name, date of birth, and contact information).

The researchers will try to prevent any problems that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will try to help you.

However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

### Participation and Benefits

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Following the completion of the study, you will receive a code for free registration for

the *New Ways for Families* online 12-class coparent education course for your participation. If you would like to know the results of this study we will email or mail them to you. \*

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study, you should ask the researchers; their contact information is at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the TWU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

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Signature of Participant

---

Date

\*If you would like to know the results of this study, please tell us where you would like for the results to be sent:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ or Address: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Was your participation in the NWFF program mandated by the Court or voluntary?

Please explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. If your participation was mandated by the Court, how long was the period of time before you were mandated to participate? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ 18-24 years old

\_\_\_\_\_ 25-34 years old

\_\_\_\_\_ 35-44 years old

\_\_\_\_\_ 45-54 years old

\_\_\_\_\_ 55-64 years old

\_\_\_\_\_ 65 years or older

4. What is your gender?

\_\_\_\_\_ Woman

\_\_\_\_\_ Man

\_\_\_\_\_ Transgender

\_\_\_\_\_ Non-binary/non-conforming

\_\_\_\_\_ Prefer not to respond

5. Please specify your ethnic/racial background?

\_\_\_\_\_ African American/Black

- ☐ Asian American/Pacific Islander
- ☐ American Indian/Native American
- ☐ Caucasian/White
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Other: Please list \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ Some High School
- ☐ High School Diploma/GED
- ☐ Some College/Associate's Degree
- ☐ College Graduate (BA, AB, BS, etc.)
- ☐ Master's Degree (MA, MS, MEng, Med, MSW, MBA, etc.)
- ☐ Doctoral Degree (PhD, PsyD, MD, JD, etc.)
- ☐ Professional Degree (MD, DDS, DVM, JD)

7. What is your current marital status?

- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Living with someone without being married
- ☐ Never Married
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Other

8. What is your current living arrangement with your coparent?

- ☐ Living together, but in separate bedrooms
- ☐ Living together, but sharing a bedroom

- ☐ Not living together
- ☐ In the process of moving out
- ☐ Other

9. Number of children under the age of 18 living in more than one household \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your employment status (Please check all that apply)

- ☐ Employed Full-Time (40 hours or more/week)
- ☐ Employed Part-Time (20 hours or less/week)
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Unable to Work
- ☐ Unemployed

11. What is your yearly income?

- ☐ \$10,000 or less
- ☐ \$10,001 - \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,001 - \$30,000
- ☐ \$30,001 - \$40,000
- ☐ \$40,001 - \$50,000
- ☐ \$50,001 - \$60,000
- ☐ \$60,000 or higher
- ☐ Prefer not to state

12. Please rate the conflict in your coparenting relationship BEFORE you BEGAN the NWFF program.

- ☐ No Conflict
- ☐ Low

- \_\_\_\_\_ Minimal
- \_\_\_\_\_ Moderately Severe
- \_\_\_\_\_ High Conflict
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prefer not to state

13. Please rate the conflict in your coparenting relationship AFTER you COMPLETED the NWFF program.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Zero to Low
- \_\_\_\_\_ Minimal
- \_\_\_\_\_ Moderately Severe
- \_\_\_\_\_ High Conflict
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prefer not to state
- \_\_\_\_\_ No change

14. How long did it take you to complete the NWFF program? \_\_\_\_\_

15. Did your coparent complete the NWFF program, too? \_\_\_\_\_

16. Year you completed the NWFF program \_\_\_\_\_

17. If your coparent participated, year he/she completed the NWFF program \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Interviewer:** Today, I am going to talk to you about your experience with the *New Ways for Families in Separation or Divorce* program. If at any time during the interview process, you begin to feel uncomfortable, please let me know so we can take a break. You can also ask to discontinue the interview at any time.

#### **Questions with Planned Prompts:**

1. Please tell me how you were referred to the NWFF program.
  - a. What was the referral experience like for you?
  - b. What was your experience of the legal/family court professionals in the referral process?
  - c. In what ways were the legal/family court professionals helpful or unhelpful?
2. Let's talk about your experience of the program.
  - a. What were you hoping to get out of the program before you started?
  - b. What part(s) of the program did you find the most helpful?
  - c. What part(s) of the program did you find the least helpful?
  - d. How helpful were the homework assignments in the Parent Workbook?
3. Please tell me about your experience with the NWFF coach/counselor.
  - a. In what ways were the counselor/coach helpful or unhelpful?
  - b. How closely did your coach/counselor follow the structure of the Parent Workbook? In what ways was this helpful or unhelpful?
  - c. What feedback would you provide to the coach/counselor about his or her use of the program?



4. If you participated in the joint session with your coparent:
  - a. What were you hoping to get out of the joint session before you started?
  - b. Please tell me how the joint sessions impacted your relationship with your coparent. In what ways were the sessions helpful or unhelpful?
  - c. How helpful was the coach/counselor in the sessions with your coparent?
  - d. What feedback would you provide to the parent coach/counselor about his or her use of the program in the joint session with your coparent?
5. If you participated in the parent-child sessions:
  - a. What were you hoping to get out of the parent-child sessions before you started?
  - b. Please tell me how the parent-child sessions impacted your relationship with your children. In what ways were the sessions helpful or unhelpful?
  - c. How helpful was the coach/counselor in the sessions with your child?
  - d. What feedback would you provide to the parent coach/counselor about his or her use of the program in the parent-child sessions?
6. In what ways, if any, did your participation in this program impact conflict in the coparenting relationship?
7. What recommendations do you have for the NWFF program developers?
8. What recommendations do you have for the family court professionals?
9. What recommendations do you have for the individual coach/counselors?
10. Lastly, is there anything else you would like for us to know about?

**Interviewer:** This concludes your interview. Thank you for taking the time to participate. The results will be made available for your review at the conclusion of the study.