

Christy Bradshaw Schmidt, MA, LPC
Child Custody Evaluator/Expert Consultant
P.O. Box 2043; Coppell, Texas 75019
Telephone: 214-502-7224; Facsimile: 972-745-4585
www.txfamilylawforensics.com
christy@txfamilylawforensics.com

My name is Christy Bradshaw Schmidt, MA, LPC. I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, and I have been licensed in the State of Texas since 1997. I have been working as a child custody evaluator and expert consultant since 2000. I work exclusively in the field of family law forensics, and I have extensive experience in the arena of Parent Child Contact Problems, as well as numerous other areas that directly impact children in family law matters. I have specifically taught a total of five sixteen hour courses in Advanced Reunification Therapy with Dr. Susan Fletcher since 2020. Dr. Susan Fletcher and I also presented at the Dallas County Bench Bar Conference on Parent Child Contact Problems, and we conducted a three hour Advanced Reunification Training for Attorneys in April 2022. We have also presented on this topic on a national level through the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) along with Judge Emily Miskel and Dr. Aaron Robb, and I am intricately familiar with the peer-reviewed research in this area.

Parent Child Contact Problems (PCCP) is a fairly new term of art, which speaks to the dynamics that occur in a family when a child resists or refuses contact with a parent. In the past, when such resistance or refusal would occur, the initial impression was that parental alienation must be occurring, and at times, such resistance or refusal is related to the alienating behavior on the part of one parent, which according to Kelly and Johnston (2001), involves a child's persistent and unreasonable rejection of a competent parent. However, there are a number of other alternative explanations that the research suggests should be examined and explored as to the potential hypotheses that might explain the resistance or refusal that is occurring in a parent/child relationship. Specifically, some children resist or refuse contact with a parent due to reasons of estrangement. According to Kelly and Johnston (2001), estrangement involves a child's rejection or resistance of contact with a parent due to psychological or physical abuse, neglect, parental absence, or incompetent parenting.

Another reason for consideration as to why a child may resist contact with a parent is the possibility of enmeshment. According to Friedlander and Walters (2010) and Garber (2011), enmeshment refers to a chronic problem between the aligned parent and the child to the point that the psychological boundaries blur between the aligned parent's intentions and feelings and the child's own intentions and feelings.

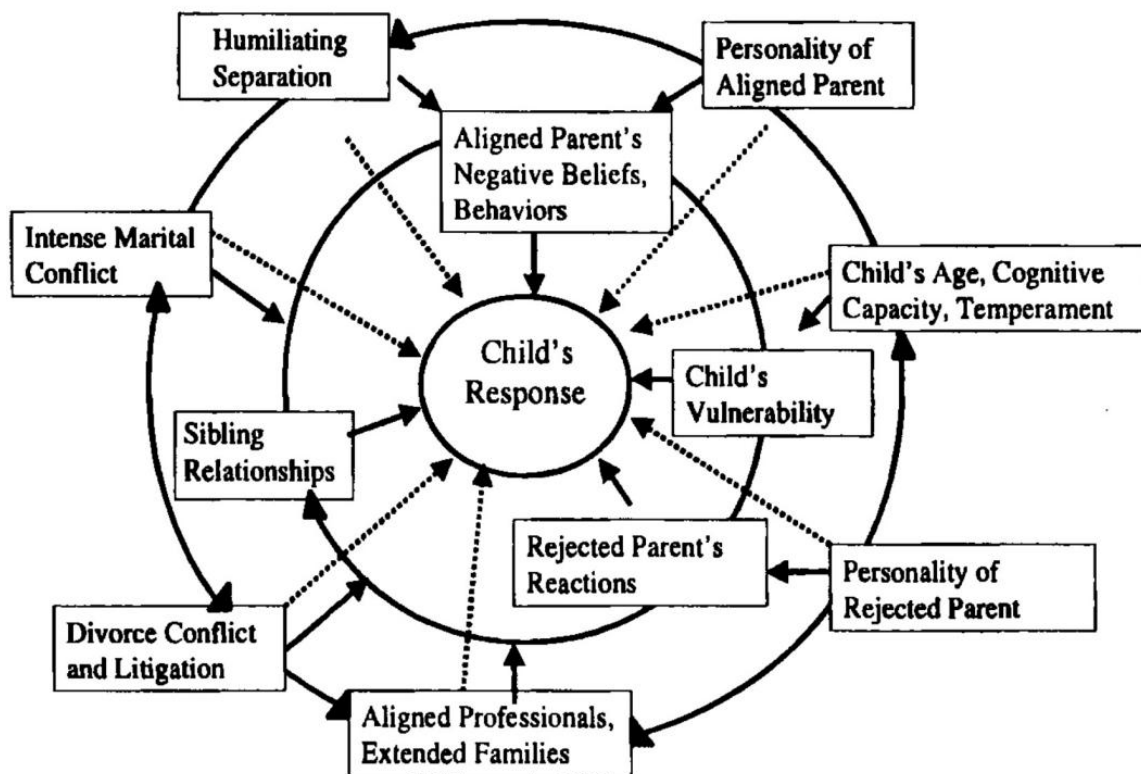
A fourth reason for further exploration related to PCCP is the possibility of affinity. According to Fidler and Bala (2010) and Kelly and Johnston (2001) who are quoted by Fidler, Deutsch, and Polak in Evidence-Informed Interventions for Court-Involved Families, a book edited by Lyn Greenberg, Barbara J. Fidler, and Michael Saini (2019), a child may develop an affinity toward one parent due to a child's age, temperament, gender identification, familiarity with that parent, additional time spent together, and common interests. Such an affinity refers to the developmental stage of a child that must be examined as to the reason that a child may be resisting contact with a parent. However, such an affinity often exists when a child continues contact with both parents.

A fifth reason that PCCP may exist within a parent/child relationship is the concept of alignment. Fidler and Bala (2010); Johnston, Roseby, and Kuehnle (2009); and Kelly and Johnston (2001) describe alignment as a dynamic that can develop between a parent and a child before, during, or after parental separation. Alignment can occur for a variety of reasons, including: one parent's absence or lack of

involvement as a parent; one parent's poor parenting choices and judgment; or due to reasons related to the actual divorce that can result in feelings of betrayal, depression, or anger. Alignment can specifically occur for what one might consider valid or understandable reasons, and alignment can also occur as a result of parental triangulation in response to coparenting conflict (Amato and Afifi, 2006; Buehler and Welsh, 2009; and Grych, Raynor, and Fosco, 2004). Within these circumstances, children often align with the parent who they believe to be "right" within the current conflict.

Finally, the last consideration in relation to PCCP is what is termed a hybrid case that involves one or more of the previously identified explanations as to why a child may resist or refuse contact with a parent.

Within the Greenberg, Fidler, and Saini book, there is a diagram that was originally created by Kelly and Johnston from 2001 that can be quite helpful in understanding a child's response within a family system when PCCP are present and that diagram is outlined below. This diagram can help the legal and mental health professionals better understand the role that each family member plays (or can play) in the PCCP:



As is clear from the information described above, the forensically trained community is moving away from the use of the term parental alienation and moving toward the concept of Parent Child Contact Problems. The reason for this shift is because, as Fidler and Ward point out, parent/child contact problems are significantly more complex and multi-determined. In fact, Fidler and Ward go on to encourage legal and mental health professionals to move beyond polarizing phrases and simple analyses because such approaches do not capture the subtlety of these cases. Legal and mental health professionals can also easily become prone to mirroring the rigid and all or nothing thinking of the parents and children they serve.

In turn, when examining cases involving PCCP to determine what is really occurring, it is vital that the family system as a whole be examined because every family member involved is crucial to the understanding of what is occurring in the system. It is also important that specific questions be asked:

1. Does the favored parent support the child not following the parenting time schedule?
2. Are the child's reasons for resisting or refusing contact with a parent vague and unjustified?
3. Are the child's negative narratives about the rejected parent supported by the data/evidence?
4. Is one parent seen as all good, and the other parent seen as all bad?
5. Does the child deny previous positive experiences with the rejected parent?
6. Does the child reject alternative views?

With that said, the research is also clear that it is outside the scope of a Reunification Therapist's role to opine on the reason that the resistance or refusal is occurring in a family. That determination is for the trier of fact or a court-appointed Child Custody Evaluator who has the ability to examine all aspects of the family system to assist in making such a determination.