

**POST-SEPARATION PARENTAL CONFLICT SERVICE NEEDS**

by

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MAJOR PAPER SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

In the School of Social Work and Human Services

Diane M. Keegan 2012

UNIVERSITY OF THE FRASER VALLEY

May 2012

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## **Acknowledgements**

This research paper was made possible through the help and support of many people, including UFV faculty, family, and friends.

I am deeply indebted to my Senior Supervisor, Dr Adrienne Chan, for her unwavering guidance and sincere commitment towards my success. Her motivating suggestions, knowledge, experience and encouragement were of great assistance throughout the project study period.

Also, I am thankful to my Second Examiner, Dr Robert Harding, who reviewed the report and provided vital guidance and encouragement.

I am very appreciative of the time and assistance provided by the participants of this research. The information given was thoughtful, insightful and pertinent in facilitating understanding of the research issues.

Finally, I sincerely thank my family and friends, who freely gave of their time and financial support. This paper would not be possible without all of them.

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## List of Acronyms

### *Acronyms used within Research Report*

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Acronym	Meaning
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AG	Ministry of the Attorney General
BC	British Columbia
DEP	Divorce Education Programs
FJC	Family Justice Counselling
FLA	Family Law Act
FRA	Family Relations Act
HC	High Conflict
MCFD	Ministry of Children and Family Development
PA	Parental Alienation
PAS	Parenting After Separation
PC	Parenting Coordination
REB	Research Ethics Board
UFV	University of the Fraser Valley

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## **Abstract**

The effect of separation and divorce on children and families has been extensively studied. Numerous studies have identified “high conflict” to be a critical factor affecting problems in adjustment for children pre and post separation. High conflict is the term most often used within the literature to describe situations of post-separation discord, characterized by the presence of elevated anger, hostility and distrust between parents, high levels of litigation, alienation of the child by one parent, and domestic violence issues. While there is much literature pointing to the need for parents to stop engaging in direct conflict (physical and verbal), there is less information about the best way to bring an end to the persistent parental conflict and discord.

The purpose of this research is to examine existing services available for parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation, with a focus on services as a means for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning, to be accomplished through exploring the perspectives of professionals involved with these families. The objectives included exploring the perceptions of community professionals about programs, and determining if other interventions are needed to address the issues of high conflict for separating parents and their families.

This study used a qualitative, cross sectional exploratory design. The data was collected through a total of ten open-ended interviews using the general interview guide approach.

Findings from the study indicate existing intervention services are perceived as inadequate in addressing the particular needs of high conflict family members. Participants consistently pointed to a distinct lack of accessible long-term, cost-free and therapeutic services. In particular, a need was expressed for accessible services, which address the multiple complex issues specifically related to high conflict family situations. Counselling or mental health assessment and treatment was the foremost recommendation suggested in all of the interviews.

**Keywords:** High conflict, parent conflict, divorce, separation, social work, intervention, child effect.



## Introduction

Separation and divorce are common occurrences in society today. Consequently, divorce continues to be a subject of interest in the research literature. For many years, divorce has commonly been associated with negative outcomes for children. While it is self-evident that there is an effect of divorce, it has yet to be proven conclusively that children are primarily affected negatively by divorce. Amato (2010) poses an important question relevant to the issue of causal effect: “Rather than ask *whether* divorce affects children, a more pertinent question may be *how* and *under what circumstances* does divorce affect children either positively or negatively?” (p. 658).

As a researcher, my interest in this topic arose during my employment as a child welfare social worker, which included involvement in various parental conflict circumstances. Throughout these experiences as a worker, a gap in services offered to assist high conflict families in navigating their post-separation adjustment became apparent. It was very difficult to find services dedicated expressly to helping parents manage their conflicts, or services which targeted related positive outcomes for children. Professional discussions with colleagues led to the common view that existing psycho-educational programs appeared to be aimed at reducing court times, but did little to provide psychological or practical support to family members to move past their conflict issues. As well, not all separated parents were involved with the court system. Overall, there appeared to be a lack of consistency in program availability or direction for therapy solutions to help family members.

The purpose of this research was to examine existing services available for parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation, with a focus on services as a means for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning. The purpose of this study was accomplished through exploring the perspectives of professionals involved with these families. The objectives of the study were to: (1) Explore the perceptions of community professionals about effective programs that may

exist to address and reduce parental conflict after separation; and (2) Determine if other interventions are needed to address the issues of high conflict for separating parents and their families. This paper reports the findings and conclusions of the research conducted.

### **Background and Significance of the Problem**

The effect of separation and divorce on families has been extensively studied, and parental conflict has long been associated with children's negative adjustment following divorce. Numerous studies have identified parental discord as a critical factor affecting problems in adjustment for children pre and post separation (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The literature thoroughly documents the reality that conflict intensifies the impact of separation, with high levels of parental conflict considered one of the most prominent factors affecting post-separation adjustment for children and their parents (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

High conflict separations are the most stressful for children. In 20 to 30% of divorces, conflict is determined to be chronically high, resulting in children being exposed to the harmful effects of discord while also trying to cope with issues of family dissolution (Ravitz, 2011). High conflict separation or divorce is characterized by open expressions of emotional hostility, poor problem solving, and regular, unrelenting patterns of ongoing disagreement about numerous issues (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). These parents commonly engage in black and white thinking, and are unresponsive to standard resolutions or interventions, such as counselling, parent or divorce education programs and mediation (Neff & Cooper, 2004).

Inter-parental conflict has the potential to weaken family relationships (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Existing literature correlates the effect of discord to child well-being by means of attachment concepts. Secure attachments with parents assist children to develop positive self-esteem, and perhaps the ability to separate their parent's issues from their own (DeBoard-Lucas,

Fosco, Raynor & Grych, 2010). Multiple studies refer to western societal ideology, with the positive effect of constructive parenting behaviours identified to act in shielding children from the adverse effects of conflict (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2002; Skopp, McDonald, Jouriles, & Rosenfield, 2007), not including consideration for the effects of attachment to extended family and communal relationships.

Existing literature acknowledges the differences between low and high levels of conflict characteristics in parental discord. Fainsilber Katz and Woodin (2002) suggest it is the presence of both hostility and detachment within the relationship that demonstrates the most damaging form of conflict to child and family functioning. Barriers to the co-parenting process exist in the use of coercive family practices, and characteristics include low levels of warmth and harmony in conjunction with high levels of conflict and competitiveness (Fainsilber Katz & Woodin, 2002). Parental characteristics that mitigate the effects of conflict are those that provide for a warm, supportive atmosphere responsive to the child's needs with open communication, and firm but consistent positive discipline (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

The most common intervention solutions to address parental discord are found in court-based education programs for separating or divorcing parents. These programs are on the rise, with every province in Canada offering such a program, and parents regularly reporting high levels of satisfaction (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). There is also evidence that these parent education programs do have a positive effect on families, leading to increased receptiveness by parents to the needs of their children (Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis & Hoza, 1998). However, Bacon and McKenzie (2004) found that reducing conflict between parents did not necessarily lead to more supportive or accommodating parental behaviours. They emphasized the need for parents to cease their conflictual behaviours, but moreover to replace these conduct patterns with positive ones (p. 95).

In British Columbia, the Parenting After Separation (PAS) program is recognized as an important part of the family court process through its compulsory status preceding commencement of family court involvement. In the *Court Rules Act*, rule number 21 outlines PAS as a requirement for both parties prior to initiating court applications for child custody, access, guardianship or child maintenance matters. Section 2 of the rule states the purpose of the PAS program is to “to promote the best interests of children by providing a program of information, the Parenting after Separation Program, to persons in dispute over issues respecting children” (Government of British Columbia, 2010). Thus, the provincially funded program is committing to act as an intervention for families.

The *Family Law Act (FLA)* was introduced in November 2011 to the BC legislature as Bill 16, quickly passed its third reading and is expected to be put into place within the next two years (Courthouse Libraries BC Blog, 2011). The *FLA* represents an overhaul to the existing *Family Relations Act (FRA)* legislation currently in place governing family law issues in British Columbia. Its foundation lies in the White paper, released by the Ministry of the Attorney General in July 2010, which followed a 2006 foundational review and plan to modernize the existing *FRA* legislation (Family Relations Act Working Group, 2010).

In the scope of parental conflict issues, a primary change of the new *FLA* is its emphasis on resolution of family legal issues by way of out-of-court processes. The White paper provided support for the provincial government to expand services available to meet the expected increased need for arbitration, mediation, parenting coordination and other professional services to strengthen children’s voices in the family court system (Family Relations Act Working Group, 2010; p. 10). Under the *FLA*, the court will have enhanced powers to make orders to manage issues and encourage dispute resolution, such as imposing counselling, bond posting to ensure compliance, and contact restrictions (Boyd, 2008).

The *Family Law Act* is considered progressive and effective in modernizing family law in BC, placing children's rights ahead of those of their parents (Boyd, 2008). The Ministry of the Attorney General (AG) emphasized the intended impact of the new legislation on children, in titling their November 14, 2011 press release "B.C.'s new Family Law Act puts children first" (Ministry of the Attorney General, 2011), re-affirming the "best interests of the child" doctrine. Additionally, The FLA document reveals an explicit predisposition towards collaborative practices. Part 2 of the Act is comprised of three core divisions: (1) Resolution Out of Court Preferred, (2) Family Justice Counsellors, and (3) Parenting Coordinators (Government of British Columbia, 2011). Related to this research project and the topic of post-separation parental conflict, the *FLA* offers an explanatory note at the end of the legislative document stating implicitly that the new Act will, among other things, "promote family dispute resolution to resolve disputes" (Government of British Columbia, 2011).

Parenting coordination (PC) services in British Columbia are currently organized through the British Columbia Parenting Coordinators Roster Society, which is made up of lawyers and mental health professionals who have a recognized training program to organize parenting coordinators in the province (British Columbia Parenting Coordinators Roster Society, n.d.). Until recently, there has been no statutory authority governing PC in British Columbia. Neither the *Family Relations Act* nor the *Divorce Act* legislation provided guidance for arbitration, parenting coordination, or alternative dispute resolution methods. Lacking governance, British Columbia currently utilizes the *Commercial Arbitration Act* for PC, which directs all arbitration in British Columbia (Boyd, 2011; p. 3). Since the BC Parenting Coordinators Roster Society was put in place, the courts have begun to make decisions ordering parents to participate with PC services (Boyd, 2011; p. 7).

While the literature collectively points to the need to stop parents from engaging in direct conflict (physical and verbal) in order to protect children from harm in high conflict separations, it is

less informative about the best way to bring an end to the persistent parental battling (Ravitz, 2011). This research project intended to explore the existing services available which were intended to address the complex issues of post-separation parental conflict, and identify any gaps or service needs for this population.

There appears to be a dearth of research into the perceptions of community professionals who work directly with families engaged in high level of post-separation conflict. The only study found within the past 10 years regarding the perceptions of community professionals was conducted by Taylor (2004) using questionnaires, as a follow-up to the implementation of divorce education programming in 1996 in western Colorado. While the majority of respondents believed it to be having a positive impact, approximately two thirds of respondents were unaware of the existence of the program, or did not know enough about the program to make suggestions for change. Thus, more community awareness and networking was recommended to educate community professionals about the program to increase community referrals and availability of professional expertise in improving the program (Taylor, 2004).

### **Literature Review**

While separation and divorce are experienced collectively by all citizens, the impact may be direct or indirect. High divorce rates continue to create interest in the research community regarding separation and divorce issues (Amato, 2001; p. 355). Research on divorce over the past ten years has focused on themes of child or spouse adjustment, divorce predictors, and involvement strategies for helping divorcing families (Amato, 2010; p. 650). Recent divorce legislation reflects philosophical changes that act to eliminate the idea of parental rights to children, looking instead towards child welfare (Baker, 2007).

While the majority of couple separations are able to transition quickly into reconciliation or dissolution (Amato, 2010; p. 650), there are some that endure and involve chronic levels of high

conflict. In twenty to thirty percent of divorces, conflict is determined to be chronically high, resulting in children being exposed to the harmful effects of discord while also trying to cope with issues of family dissolution (Ravitz, 2011). As a result, multiple dimensions of specialized study in these particular areas have become prominent. In the research, there is a notable differentiation between the issues for typical divorcing families and a smaller subset of families who remain engaged in elevated discord. High conflict divorces are the most stressful for children, and emerge as very different from other divorce and are characterized by ongoing hostile interactions and persistent court involvement (Malcore, Windell, Seyuin & Hill. 2010; p. 50; Ravitz, 2011).

Public attitudes towards divorce have softened considerably in the past two decades, in part due to the introduction of no-fault divorce and have resulted in dramatic increases in divorce rates and the lowering of marital happiness thresholds which prompt divorce (Amato, 2001; p. 357). Family circumstances of separation and divorce have become normative events, despite recurring corroboration of its harmful effects of parents, children and the general public (Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson & Treharne, 2011; p. 455). Yet, high conflict divorces emerge as very different from other divorce and are characterized by ongoing hostile interactions and persistent court involvement (Malcore, et al., 2010; p. 50).

### **Terminology**

The term most often used in the literature to classify the group of post-separation parents engaged in chronic discord is *high-conflict*. Due to the theoretical foundations of current research, a clear and consensus-based workable definition of “high conflict” is absent; Birnbaum and Bala (2010) posit that “high-conflict” is often used as an umbrella term, encompassing cases of high and repeated litigation, elevated communication issues involving anger and distrust, alienation of the child by one parent, and domestic violence issues carried out by one parent (p. 404). Stacer and

Stemen (2000) define *high-conflict* as:

a situation in which one or both parents involved in the conflict cannot or will not let go of their marriage battle, and because their conflict continues to disrupt the adjustment of the family, frequent intervention by the court system is required (p 242).

The operational definition used throughout this research project encapsulated high-conflict separation or high-conflict divorce as characterized by open expressions of emotional hostility, poor problem solving, and regular, unrelenting patterns of ongoing disagreement about numerous issues (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). These parents commonly engage in black and white thinking, and are unresponsive to standard resolutions or interventions, such as counselling, parent or divorce education programs and mediation (Neff & Cooper, 2004).

### **Divorce and Co-Habitation**

In considering separation of high conflict (HC) couples, divorce is commonly used as a research standard. There are few studies of separations involving unmarried cohabiting HC parents. Rather, the study of cohabiting parents is centered on the relative instability of these unions when compared to marriages, with little known about similarities or differences in adjustment for parents or children in dissolution of married or cohabiting partnerships (Amato, 2010; p. 661). Another area of study seldom explored is the issue of separation of married couples rather than divorce. Little is known about how separation (but not necessarily divorce) interrelates with the well-being of parents and children (Amato, 2010; p. 661).

Divorce frequency rates are difficult to quantify due to the methods used for statistic and data collection (Amato, 2010). Nonetheless, it is clear that divorce rates are on the rise (Amato, 2010; p. 651), with 71,269 divorces recorded in 2005 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). No known statistics are recorded for families that separate with children without entering into a marriage or separate without legally divorcing.



While most couples are able to resolve issues relating to separation and divorce within approximately one year, HC couples repeatedly return to court to resolve disputes, making up approximately one fourth of all divorces (Malcore, et al., 2010; p. 50-51). Neff and Cooper (2004) posit HC cases are representative of ten percent of family law matters currently before the court, yet they consume nearly ninety percent of the court's time. It is interesting to note that not all couples who engage in post-separation HC interactions exhibit persistent relationship dysfunction prior to separation (Amato, 2010; p. 653). Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) identified two main pathways for risk of divorce in couples, whether they are conflictual prior to separation or not: (1) high levels of marital discord and unhappiness and (2) low levels of marital commitment (cited in Amato, 2010; p. 653).

Research regarding risk factors for divorce involves two main areas of concern; broad demographic and economic factors, and more individual relationship characteristics (Amato, 2010; p. 652). Of relevance for this research project is the personal relationship predictors. Associated issues include weak bonds of love and trust between spouses, low levels of relationship commitment, infidelity, frequent conflict, and domestic violence (Amato, 2010; p. 652).

### **Family Law and the Social Context**

Canadian family law has changed dramatically over the past two hundred years. Prior to the twentieth century, patriarchal common law prevailed, viewing the father as the legal and natural guardian of his children (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 407). A dramatic shift in philosophy followed throughout most of the twentieth century; paternal influences were supplanted by views that strongly presumed mothers to be the appropriate caregivers for children under the "tender years" doctrine (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 407; Deutsch, 2008, p. 42). By 1975, many governing bodies espoused the "best interests of the child" principle approach to legal and legislative reform. Under this

thinking, the parent who provided the majority of care for the child while the couple was together commonly assumed primary care responsibilities after separation (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 407).

Modern legal systems are concerned about the impact of litigation delays on families (Deutsch, 2008, p. 42). In Canadian family law, there is a presumption against joint custody or shared parenting in HC cases (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 408). Although parental discord can be harmful to children, it is not solely the conflict which is harmful, but the ways parents act to convey, communicate, deal with and resolve conflict which are most significant (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 410). Contemporary interventions offered for families engaged in HC circumstances involve the blending of mental health and family legal services (Deutsch, 2008, p. 42).

### **Emotional Abuse and Domestic Violence**

Although the literature states there is an established relationship between conflict, domestic violence and harmful post-separation adjustment for children (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 404), researchers have been reluctant to explicitly establish HC parenting situations as circumstances of emotional abuse or harm to children. The literature often refers to *negative adjustment problems* as outcomes for children, but resists calling the associated parental conduct abusive or hurtful. Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) state high interparental conflict post-separation can cause psychological harm to children who are exposed to the chronic discord, while Lee (2001) proposes children's involvement in marital disputes may place them at risk for harm, as a parent may turn their anger and aggression towards the child (p. 157). HC situations incorporate cases involving domestic violence, parental alienation factors, co-parenting and access exchange problems (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 412).

There is considerable research regarding the effect of marital conflict on children within the context of domestic violence research. Some of this research is relevant to this research project due to the findings that disagreement patterns within the marriage are connected to post-separation

conflict patterns. Numerous studies have identified parental discord as a critical factor affecting problems in adjustment for children pre and post separation (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Exposure to parental anger and associated conflict is psychologically and physiologically stressful for children (Dunn, O'Connor & Cheng, 2005, p. 223; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000). Conflict is harmful to children when they directly witness incidents, but all discord has the consequence of reducing parenting skill and psychological health which then has an indirect effect on children (Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

In the United States and Canada, emotional abuse is defined differently in provincial or state legislative authority, likely due to local variations in ideological beliefs. Difficulties in defining emotional abuse exist because there is a distinct lack of agreement regarding the degrees of behaviours which constitute maltreatment (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Common definitions of emotional abuse typically involve parental displays of persistent emotionally harming behaviours (verbal or physical) which cause damage to a child, whether they are intentional or not. Hamarman and Bernet (2000) offer an operational definition for emotional abuse, which includes both a level of severity from mild to severe, and a range of behaviours: rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, corrupting, verbally assaulting and over-pressuring (par.5). These action-focused definitions are intended to serve as guidance tools for assessing intervention needs.

Emotional maltreatment has increased at a greater rate than any other type of abuse, becoming one of the leading forms of abuse towards children in Canada, with a rate of twenty-nine percent in 2003; in many cases the abuse is linked to some form of family or domestic violence (Chamberland, Fallon, Black & Trocmé, 2011). Thus, emotional harm is an important factor when considering HC post-separation circumstances and its effect on children.

## **Emotional Adjustment**

**Negative adjustment: Separation and divorce factors.** Research has consistently demonstrated connections between divorce and negative adjustment for children (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych, et al., 2000; Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson & Treharne, 2011; Langan, 2011, p. 252). Compared to children of continuously married parents, children of divorced parents achieve poorer outcomes in various behavioural, social, emotional, academic and health domains (Amato, 2001, p. 355; Frisco, Muller & Frank, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002). Problematic symptoms can include signs of mental health issues, such as conduct disorders, antisocial behaviour, depression and anxiety. Other conduct issues include poor interpersonal social skills, and externalizing behaviours such as aggression, defiance and delinquency (Bing, Nelson III & Wesolowski, 2009; p. 161).

In probing child adjustment factors, it is helpful to examine early research on divorce which supports the generally accepted notion that children are affected negatively by the divorce process. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) outline the premise of early research as being based on two commonly held assumptions regarding child adjustment. First, it was assumed that the two parent family structure was necessary in order for children to be socialized successfully and that a fatherless home would be damaging to children, particularly boys. Second, it was assumed that divorce itself was a traumatic event that had permanent harmful effects on children's adjustment. Current researchers recognize that divorce plays only one part in the process of transition, and that post-separation experiences also impact children's adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Many changes occur for parents and children following a separation or divorce. These include residence relocation, family structure and routine adjustments, income variance, and possible behaviour, mood and achievement issues (Bing, et al., 2009, p. 160). The divorce transition

is associated with income loss, residential mobility, altered friendship networks, changes in relationships with parents and reduced contact with family connections (Hanson, 1999). Thus, relative family stability issues play a vital role in outcomes for families.

In all families, including those affected by divorce, the quality of the parenting environment is associated with children's adjustment and well-being. Parental characteristics that mitigate the effects of conflict are those that provide for a warm, supportive atmosphere responsive to the child's needs with open communication, and firm but consistent positive discipline (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The negative impact of parental discord is believed to be mediated by positive relationships between children and their parents (Dunn, et al., p. 224). Factors connected to the overall wellbeing of children after divorce encapsulate self-esteem, behavioural problems, school and social competence, as well as influences of parental conflict, degree of closeness between children and parents, parental adjustment to divorce, and individual factors such as age, sex and personality of the child (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Moyer, 2004).

While children of divorced parents are generally less socially, emotionally and academically well-adjusted than peers in non-divorced families, there is no universal agreement regarding the extent and importance of these differences (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Some children adapt well following divorce due to pre-existing factors that help them cope with stressors. Protective factors buffering them from stress include maternal warmth and positive emotionality in temperament (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002).

Longitudinal studies in the late 1990s (Hanson, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999) presented mixed outcomes relating to discord, suggesting the marital relationship may play a role in determining adjustment of children. While severe parental conflict is generally more detrimental to children than lower levels of discord, children in these severe conflict families are helped when the marriage ends (Hanson, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999), perhaps benefiting from the respite of the

dysfunctional HC environment. Children also gain opportunities to learn to grow personally, and are able to develop other rewarding and positive social relationships (Hetherington, 2006, p. 204; Kushner, 2009, p. 503). A stronger focus on the variability of factors and outcomes in current research would be helpful in understanding more about the range of divorce factors affecting children (Amato, 2010, p. 658).

**Negative adjustment: High conflict factors.** Parental conflict has long been associated with children's negative adjustment following divorce, with conflicted parents making up ten to fifteen percent of those who co-parent after divorce (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9). Persistent parental discordant relationships after separation prevent parents from remaining focused on their children's needs and frequently results in prolonged court litigation and relitigation patterns (Henry, et al., 2011, p. 456). High levels of parental disagreement with hostile and negative interactions are determined to be one of the most prominent factors affecting pre and post-separation adjustment for children and their parents (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Bing, et al., 2009, p. 160; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Henry, et al., 2011; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Lee, 2001, p. 155; Moyer, 2004; Wolfinger, 2005).

Loyalty conflicts are well-documented as experienced by children who are exposed to high levels of parental conflict (Lee, 2001; p. 155). High percentages of children cope with these loyalty disputes by trying to intervene verbally or physically, while others manage by using mental strategies, such as distracting themselves by thinking about good things (Lee, 2001, p. 149). The HC environment and the child's specific vulnerabilities to parental anger combine to contribute to the level of risk a child has for developing mental health problems (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Exposure to destructive forms of parental discord often leave children feeling the powerful emotions of sadness, fear, anger, anxiety, or hopelessness; feelings which frequently lead to internalizing or externalizing disorders (Ayoub, Deutsch & Maraganore, 1999; Lee, 2001, p. 146).

Exposure of children to overt interparental conflict is a direct stressor for children (Amato & Cheadle, 2008). Researchers hypothesize children are affected emotionally by HC as it causes them to worry that their parents will stop caring for them (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Post-separation hostility is also connected to poor outcomes for children (Dunn, et al., 2005, p. 223). In a study of parental conflict styles and frequency rates, Buehler, Krisnakumar and Stone (1998) correlated overtly hostile parent behaviour with both internalizing and externalizing problems for children, while covert hostility (e.g., passive-aggressive or triangulating behaviours) were associated with internalizing problems for children (cited in Kushner, 2009, p. 503).

Most harmful forms of conflict are identified to be those involving parental issues that engage the children in disputes, are about the children or situations that escalate to involve physical violence (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Karpf & Shatz, 2005). Less destructive forms include situations when discord resolves itself, is contained between parents, is relatively infrequent, is less intense emotionally and physically, is not about the children or childrearing and does not involve the children (Emery, Otto & O'Donahue, 2005). Researchers make the distinction between constructive and destructive modes of conflict. Discord is considered constructive when it includes problem solving, support and affection, and destructive when they contain verbal or physically aggressive acts (Ayoub, et al., 1999). Multiple studies refer to the positive effect of constructive parenting behaviours in shielding children from the adverse effects of conflict (Davies, et al, 2002; Skopp, et al., 2007) because they do not compel children to intervene or feel emotionally vulnerable, and also assist children to develop their own positive coping and conflict resolution styles (Ayoub, et al, 1999).

When children believe they are able to cope with conflict situations, they are less affected by the discord (Grych, et al., 2000). The negative impact of parental disagreement is believed to be mediated by positive relationships between children and their parents (Dunn, et al., 2005, p. 224).

The literature points to several protective factors enhancing resiliency for children from HC families, including involvement with the non-resident parent, reduced interparental conflict after separation, and primary caregiver physical and psychological competency (Kushner, 2009, p. 506).

## **High Conflict**

**Dynamics of conflict.** High conflict (HC) plays an important role within the complexities and dynamics of separation and divorce. Johnston (1994) put forward a conceptual model for divorce conflict with three distinct dimensions of conflict: (1) the domain – including practical aspects such as custody and access, (2) the tactics – including the ways parents resolve disagreements, and (3) the attitudinal dimensions – including the levels of emotional intensity and hostility aimed at the other parent (as cited in Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 405). Johnston's (1994) conceptual model is intended to facilitate differentiation between moderate conflict where parents can be assisted to improve, and conflict which is indicative of pathology and may require reduced or suspended parental contact (as cited in Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 405). Alternately, Hopper (2001) endeavors to understand the experiences of divorcing individuals, positing that the symbolism and way each person attributes meaning to their experiences can contribute to divorce conflict (p. 443).

Fear and anxiety are the two primary components that contribute to driving HC matters (Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 245). Stacer and Stemen (2000) describe the high conflict couple as being involved in a circular sequence of events, beginning with pre-separation harmful and powerful communication patterns which generate adrenalin as a stimulus, contributing to anxiety, which then activates fear and danger responses. After the couple separates, this cycle repeats itself with increased emotional intensity as they become addicted to the adrenalin charges. The authors suggest these dramatic emotional swings leads to depressed feelings, and the continued fighting operates to prevent these feelings from settling in (Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 246).



Existing literature acknowledges the differences between low and high levels of conflict characteristics in parental discord. Fainsilber Katz and Woodin (2002) suggest that the presence of both hostility and detachment within the relationship results in the most damaging form of conflict to child and family functioning. Barriers to the co-parenting process exist in the use of coercive family practices, which are characterized by low levels of warmth and harmony in conjunction with high levels of conflict and competitiveness (Fainsilber Katz & Woodin, 2002).

**Parental psychological determinants.** Parental conduct during conflict requires a comprehensive examination to determine connections between personal vulnerabilities and the motives driving the behaviours. Despite this practicality, the literature has clearly established the psychological effects on children of HC divorce while falling short in establishing the psychological determinants of the problem for parents (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Donner, 2006, p. 542). The character traits of narcissism, self-differentiation, defensiveness, dependency and attachment are routinely associated with HC divorces (Baum & Shnit, 2003; Donner, 2006; Malcore, et al., 2010, p. 52).

Donner (2006) draws on a psychoanalytic approach, suggesting these parents subconsciously act on desires to damage the other parent and their own children, due to the contributions of combined envy, narcissism and distorted thought processes. Narcissistic parents have difficulty viewing the needs of the child, and perceive the relationship dissolution as a personal failure or attack. Thus, they are compelled to fight to maintain control in order to avoid emotional breakdown, even at great emotional cost to the child (Donner, 2006, p. 544).

Parents engaged in high conflict disputes exhibit behaviours which appear resistant to resolution through standard intervention methods, such as mediation, parenting or divorce education and counselling (Neff & Cooper, 2004). High conflict parents remain highly engaged with each other while they continue to have discordant relationships (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9). Because they

operate from a distorted stance of anger and antagonism, these parents continue to have poor communication and problem solving skills (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9). It is the disintegration of their primary functioning skills which presents risk for their children, causing them to disregard the children's needs (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9). It is for these reasons that these parents are not good candidates for the usual forms of dispute resolution, such as mediation or education programs (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9).

### **Litigation Issues**

Malcore, Windell, Seyuin and Hill (2010) suggest risk factors for continuing HC include three principal elements: dissatisfaction with monetary agreements, disagreement with access arrangements, and distinct personality styles which render individuals prone to conflict responses (p.51-52). Elements of continued and persistent court involvements are important factors for parents engaged in HC situations. Even when final court decisions are made, disagreement lingers for HC couples.

Bing, Nelson III and Wesolowski (2009) examined parental reports of conflict frequency and changes based on the level of court involvement. Results indicated parents who participated in lower levels of litigation reported less conflict, higher levels of child coping abilities and more constructive dispute resolution. The higher levels of court involvement maintained greater degrees of hostility and conflict, with higher levels of post-divorce adjustment problems. These findings are consistent with those produced by other studies, which point to more constructive child adjustment when less discord and cooperative parent relationships were present (Hetherington, 2003; cited in Bing, et al., 2009, p. 167).

In order for appropriate family justice and mental health interventions be put in place for families, it is critical for HC language to be unambiguous and meaningful (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 406). Goodman, Bonds, Sandler and Braver (2004) conceptualize interparental conflict as

consisting of three dimensions: (1) legal conflict (ie., litigation brought by one parent against the other), (2) interpersonal conflict (ie., verbal disputes, negative comments and physical violence), and (3) attitudinal conflict (ie., anger and hostility parents exchange) (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler & Braver, 2004, p. 264).

Approximately one-third to one-fourth of couples with disputes about custody issues engage in HC behaviours – these cases consume up to ninety percent of court time and energy (Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 242). Stacer and Stemen (2000) suggest that one reason these cases take up so much family court time and energy is the difficulty of having two professional disciplines involved, with shared decision-making responsibilities. Similarly, Birnbaum and Bala (2010) identify a problem area within the Canadian legal system to be circumstances where important gaps exist as barriers in understanding or differentiating between legal and clinical issues relating to HC parent disputes (p.403). Connected to these gaps is the inability of professionals to discern differences between which conflict or communication issues can be addressed by the legal system versus the mental health system (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 403). Kelly (2000) and Grych (2005) place emphasis on differentiating HC case elements from other more typical conflict problems through assessment (cited in Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 406).

### **Parental Alienation**

“Parental alienation” is a label used to describe a cluster of behaviours whereby children are exposed to parental conduct which has the potential to disrupt the child’s relationship with one of the parents (Gardner, 2002, p. 95). The name is derived from the term “Parental Alienation Syndrome”, which was coined by Richard Gardner in 1985 to describe a more serious disorder involving the child who is actively rejecting of or disparaging towards one parent (Gardner, 2002, p. 95). Parental Alienation Syndrome is a widely debated issue within the literature and is not universally accepted to be valid by professionals or courts (Gardner, 2002, p. 95). An examination

of Parental Alienation Syndrome is beyond the scope of this paper; thus, it is only the PA indicators relating to HC issues which are being reviewed.

Parental Alienation (PA) has been identified as a form of post-separation parental conflict which has lacked inclusion in the empirical research (Baker, 2005). As higher numbers of custody cases were litigated, there was an increase in the phenomenon of alienation; whereby parents attempted to influence the outcome by disrupting or interfering with the relationship children had with the other parent, in an effort to have the child on their side (Gardner, 2002, p. 93). The alienated child is described to be one who may be ambivalent in their rejecting and negative feelings or beliefs about a parent, where the denial of the parent seems unwarranted (Deutsch, 2008, p. 55).

Parental Alienation is a more general term commonly assigned by professionals to label the destructive conduct by one parent against another (e.g., blocking access, making false accusations). However, in its truest form, PA was envisioned by Gardner (2002) to include conduct by any parent which turns the child against a parent. This may incorporate a parent's own behaviours of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or even a parent's own substance abuse, narcissism or antisocial behaviour. PA is more frequently accepted for use in family court litigation matters (Gardner, 2002, p. 103). PA is associated with mild to serious adjustment and mental health problems in children which carry on through their adult lives (Baker, 2005). These difficulties include poor self-esteem, depression, addiction, attachment and trust issues, and recurring patterns of divorce and/or alienation from their own children (Baker, 2005).

### **Current Interventions**

Common current interventions for navigating the separation and divorce processes primarily consist of divorce education programs and dispute resolution processes such as mediation or court case conferences (Amato, 2010, p. 660). Mediation is the most prevalent alternative to litigation and is now commonly used by most lawyers (Langan, 2011, p. 258). School-based interventions have

had mixed degrees of success. Aggression expressed by children is managed through policies of zero tolerance in many schools, which eject children instead of providing them with needed supports such as social skill development (Ungar, 2005, p. 456). The literature reveals limited school-based interventions exist, but those that do target children's adjustment to separation and divorce have been successful through activities which help children to express feelings, learn coping and communication skills, understand divorce processes, and feel supported by peer connections (Somody & Hobbs, 2007). Divorce research in the past decade has improved dramatically and now includes topics of divorce education, parenting planning, school-based and community programs for children and parents, associations between premarital education and subsequent marital stability, and specialized interventions for HC couples (Amato, 2010, p. 660).

**High conflict separation and divorce interventions.** Research demonstrates effective high conflict interventions need to not only reduce discord, but also remove children from the conflict, teach coping skills, and encourage positive parent-child relationships (Grych, 2005). Typical existing treatment programs for HC parents involve either educating them about the effects of conflict on their children or teaching communication, coping and problem solving strategies (Malcore, et al., 2010, p. 52). While interventions may address basic conflict issues, they rarely include specialized instruction for parents in enduring HC situations (Malcore, et al., 2010, p. 52). HC families are frequently very involved with the court system, and require assistance to resolve multiple issues of parenting and access schedule planning. Parenting coordination (PC) is a new intervention which has emerged in Canada and the United States to support HC families in better navigating the court system (Deutsch, 2008, p. 59).

Since parents engaged in HC disputes exhibit behaviours which appear resistant to remedy through standard resolutions, such as mediation, parenting or divorce education and counselling (Neff & Cooper, 2004), specialized services are required to assist in adjusting to post-separation

circumstances. Gaulier, Margerum, Price and Windell (2007) provide a comprehensive listing of services for HC couples, identifying five types of commonly used interventions: (1) parenting education programs, (2) mediation and counseling programs, (3) skill-building and psychological treatment programs, (4) parent coordination and arbitration, and (5) supervised visitation and monitored exchange programs. Parenting education involves teaching parents the importance of cooperative parenting, for the benefit of the children. Mediation processes are described as cooperative alternatives to court litigation. Skill building programs include coaching parents in positive communication skills, and may include referrals to other community-based programs. Parent coordination is described as a process whereby an individual helps parents solve conflicts that arise in carrying out a parenting plan. Supervised access is a program where parents may be monitored in their contact with their children and/or during access exchanges (Gaulier, Margerum, Price & Windell, 2007).

**Divorce education programs.** The most common intervention solutions to address parental discord are found in court-based divorce education programs (DEP) for separating or divorcing parents. While children's court education programs are gaining in popularity, they are not as common as programs aimed at parents (Geelhoed, Blaisure & Geasler, 2001). DEP vary widely in nature (mandatory or voluntary), education or therapeutic content, and duration (Brotherson, White & Masich, 2010). DEP have now been widely implemented in both Canada and the United States, with many requiring mandatory attendance for family law involvement (Department of Justice Canada, 2004; Deutsch, 2008, p. 44). The courses are intended to help parents understand and minimize the effects of the divorce processes on the children. Communication and problem solving skills are taught, with a focus on removing children from any conflict situations (Brotherson, et al., 2010; Gilman, Schneider & Shulak, 2005; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler & Braver, 2004; Taylor,

2004). Many consist of only one or two sessions with parents, and provide from four to five and a half hours of instruction (Geelhoed, et al., 2001).

While existing literature demonstrates these programs do have benefits in helping to reduce the negative effects of separation and divorce on children (Brotherson, et al., 2010; Gilman, et al., 2005; Kramer, et al., 1998), the evolution of DEP has been the result of community responses to research citing negative effects on children of divorce (Whitworth, Capshew & Abell, 2002, p. 2). However, these programs have been almost universally sanctioned without the benefit of empirical research studies lending support to their effectiveness at addressing the problem (Whitworth, et al., 2002, p. 14). There is no conclusive evidence that these programs are effective at improving child adjustment problems (Goodman, et al., 2004, p. 270; Grych, 2005; Whitworth, et al., 2002, p.14). Research designs utilizing control groups instead of comparison groups are needed in order to determine the actual value and effectiveness of court-based divorce education programs (Goodman, et al., 2004, p. 270; Whitworth, et al., 2002, p. 14).

Results of divorce education studies reveal promising results, but should be regarded with a critical eye. Although parent participants and stakeholders generally report positive outcomes, such as less conflict with ex partners, less psychological distress and more positive family functioning (Geelhoed, et al., 2001), it is uncertain whether children benefit from them (Amato, 2001, p. 356). There are serious limitations in the study methodologies, as few studies employ random or probability sampling to capture a representative population sample (Amato, 2010, p. 660). While more research is encouraged regarding brief divorce education programs, there exist natural limits of their effectiveness due to their narrow scope and duration (Geelhoed, et al., 2001). Recommendations for more effective divorce education programming include lengthening the duration and overall program length, expanding services to include a follow-up support group, offering supplementary booster sessions which could include other family members, and providing

web-based information availability (Brandon, 2006, p.182). The Department of Justice Canada (2004) proposes that those parents who are unable to complete an adequate parenting plan following attendance at a DEP should then be referred by the court for additional assessment (p. 85).

Psychological education programs which teach communication skills and emotional coping skills have been shown to be ineffective in managing situations involving high levels of parental conflict (Donner, 2006, p. 549; Neff & Cooper, 2004; Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 248). While DEP do have a positive effect on families, and parents are increasingly receptive to the needs of their children (Kramer, et al., 1998), Bacon and McKenzie (2004) found that reducing conflict between parents did not necessarily lead to more supportive or accommodating parental behaviours. Bacon and McKenzie emphasized the need for parents to cease their conflictual behaviours, but moreover to replace these conduct patterns with positive ones (p. 95).

**The British Columbia context.** In Canada, every province offers a divorce education program, and parents regularly reporting high levels of satisfaction (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). In British Columbia, the Parenting After Separation (PAS) program is recognized as an important part of the family court process. In the *Court Rules Act*, rule number 21 identifies PAS as a requirement for both parties prior initiating court applications for child custody, access, guardianship or child maintenance matters. Section 2 of the rule further states the purpose of the PAS program is to “to promote the best interests of children by providing a program of information, the Parenting after Separation Program, to persons in dispute over issues respecting children” (Government of British Columbia, 2010).

The British Columbia PAS model would appear to lack an empirical basis to make certain it is an appropriate and effective intervention for high conflict parents. The current PAS program was formulated from a triage model as a way to expedite HC intervention services for families



(Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 406). In searching for empirical evidence to support the basis for the program, no evidence was located.

**Mediation.** In family matters, mediation is a form of dispute resolution which supports parents to resolve various issues with the assistance of an objective third party representative (Amato, 2010, p. 660; Langan, 2011, p. 260). Mediation is intended to be a cooperative process whereby parents can be empowered to resolve conflicts without formal litigation, offering a respite from the adversarial court process (Langan, 2011, p. 246). Because mediation utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach, it has the capacity to address psychological and emotional issues for families, freeing up the court system to deal with legal issues (Langan, 2011, p. 247). A further foundational basis is the belief that if parents can collaborate and be satisfied with the final agreement, they will also be able to work together following the divorce (Amato, 2010, p. 660).

Peeples, Reynolds and Harris (2008) analyzed data from contested custody matters in a North Carolina jurisdiction where mediation is mandatory prior to litigation. The results of the analysis indicated mediation was most effective in lower conflict cases, such as those absent of domestic violence or parental unfitness issues. Peeples, Reynolds and Harris (2008) suggested the courts could save money and time by extending the mediation models to include more sessions, to address the complex issues associated with high conflict disputes.

Mediation commonly generates more positive outcomes for reducing parental conflict, as well as increasing parental compliance and satisfaction, when compared to other adversarial processes (Amato; 2001, p. 356). As is the case with divorce education research, some studies of mediation processes have produced positive initial findings, with participants expressing greater satisfaction in many areas related to post-separation adjustment (Amato, 2010, p. 661). However, these studies often have methodological problems, such as small sampling populations and the lack of relevant comparison groups (Amato, 2010, p. 661).

**Parenting coordination.** Parenting coordination (PC) is a child-focused dispute resolution method; it is “a quasi-legal, mental health, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) process that combines assessment, education, case management, conflict management and sometimes decision-making functions” (AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, 2005, p. 2). PC is positioned within the literature as an optimal new modern intervention for HC separating parents to accomplish two primary goals: (1) reduce time spent in court litigation, and (2) decrease interparental conflict while improving communication skills (Henry, et al., 2011; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007, p. 371).

Parenting Coordination involves the use of an “unbiased skilled” professional who usually becomes involved by agreement between the parties or through court order, with the goal of helping resolve disputed issues in a levelheaded fashion (Deutsch, 2008, p. 60). The role of the coordinator is primarily to ensure parties abide by the terms of a parenting plan through use of multi-faceted facilitative techniques (Barsky, 2011, p. 8), assisting couples to modify parenting plans outside of court, teach them to communicate with each other after separation, and help promote positive relationships for each parent with their children (Henry, et al., 2011, p. 464; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007, p. 370). Other responsibilities include education, assessment, decision making and general case and conflict management (Deutsch, 2008, p. 60).

While empirical studies are limited to date, there is evidence that points to PC as a successful means for reducing conflict and court litigation (Henry, et al., 2009; Henry, et al., 2011; Neff & Cooper, 2004). Sullivan (2008) emphasizes the need for a shift in focus from interventions intended to help parents cooperate towards those that disengage conflicted parents and direct them towards parallel parenting models (p. 11). The author points to findings from research which demonstrates couples with lower levels of engagement with each other also have lower levels of discord (Sullivan, 2008, p. 11). Thus, PC would seem to be an ideal intervention due to its focus on disengaging the couple from each other.

While Parenting Coordination has been viewed with optimism as a refreshing new approach to conflict resolution for these complex high conflict cases, there are risks associated with the process. Some clients express discontent relating to the dual roles of the facilitator, alleged bias, posturing by the parties for favour in decision-making, inadequate informed consent (due to often mandated PC processes), coordinator incompetence and the finality of decisions (Barsky, 2011, p. 11). It is vital for coordinators to be well-trained to deal with multiple diverse family situations, multicultural factors and relationship dynamics (Henry, et al., 2009, p. 694), and also be creative, flexible, child-focused, assertive, diplomatic, with a good familiarity with the family laws (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007, p. 371).

### **Comments on the Literature**

While there is a clear distinction between typical separation or divorce issues and those affecting high conflict families in the little literature, few studies specify what kinds of interventions would be most successful in helping these families. Interventions for poor communication issues will be very different than those required for domestic violence or parental alienation issues (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 404). It is important that a clinical definition be conceptualized for the various elements of HC to ensure suitable treatment for the existing issues.

Although a great deal of literature is available regarding the various topics of divorce and separation, adjustment issues, family law, emotional abuse, conflict issues for parents, and associated interventions for families, much of the research fails to integrate these issues into a clear study of the intersecting factors. There is a need for research-based supports that deal specifically with the impacts of couple conflict on children (Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 18). Instead, services are put in place for parents, with mixed results, despite a distinct lack of clear empirical evidence that these services are appropriate and well-suited to the needs of the families (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010, p. 406; Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 18). Service provision that meets the needs of parents

and children would benefit from a translational research approach (Cummings & Schatz, 2012; p.18), where program development is based on relevant and proven research findings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In considering the theoretical foundations for this research, the question Amato (2010) poses is applicable to the issues of separation and divorce effect: “Rather than ask *whether* divorce affects children, a more pertinent question may be *how* and *under what circumstances* does divorce affect children either positively or negatively?” (p. 658). Theory can assist the researcher in understanding the mechanisms involved in post-separation parent conflict, and its genuine effect on children. Intervention services for post-separation couples and families are especially complex, and are best understood through application of three complementary theories: social learning, attachment, and emotional security.

In thinking about how individuals come to learn and construct conceptions of the family unit, social learning theory (Emery, 1982) offers salient explanations for the development of conflict interaction patterns. Researchers have applied the concepts of observational learning and reinforcement to explain how individuals develop their own conflict resolution styles. According to the principles of social learning, people learn marital conflict styles in their family of origin, and then generalize them to other relationships throughout their lives (Whitton, Schulz, Crowel, Waldinger, Allen, & Hauser, 2008, p. 274).

Similarly, children learn how to behave in the world through parental modelling in their family of origin. Whether parents model constructive or destructive conflict behaviours, children consistently learn to use these conflict and communication skills in their peer interactions, and carry them into their adult marital relationships (Whitton, et al., 2008, p. 274). In support of these concepts, the research literature clearly recognizes family of origin experiences to be strong predictors for both marital hostility and positive engagement (Whitton, et al, 2008, p. 274). It is on

this basis that parent training programs are considered optimal in improving conduct problems in children (Whitton, et al, 2008, p. 274). It is a reasonable assumption then, that when parents can be taught to adopt positive problem solving strategies, children can also become skilled at these relationship approaches.

As the dominant theory in recent decades for managing disruptive behaviour, social learning has been instrumental in guiding many successful interventions (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1441). Indeed, this theoretical influence directs numerous divorce education models. Yet, parent training programs based on social learning concepts are not successful in approximately one quarter to one third of cases (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1448).

The strong reliability of hostile family interactions as a predictor for future negative marital conduct suggests the need for an integrated approach which also considers the conceptual elements of attachment theory (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1448; Whitton, et al., 2008). Attachment theory may be particularly helpful in situations where parents are demonstrating more positive behaviours overall but may retain some hostility during discipline, or children persevere in exhibiting aggression (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1448).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) explores the nature and intensity of connectedness between a child and his or her parent figures within the nuclear family unit as a means for understanding parent-child relationships. Parent-child attachment differs from the parent-child relationship in its focus on parental protective behaviours and the sense of emotional security that is derived from the attachment (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1443). Attachment can result in positive or negative connectedness, with hostile family environments reliably contributing to insecure attachments and maladaptive behaviours (Whitton, et al., 2008, p. 283).

Attachment theory involves a strong focus on the nuclear family, and less on the interactions with extended family members. While some attachment behaviours are recognized to be valid

universally, there are other behaviour patterns which may differ by culture (Hammond & Romney, 2003, p. 317); a “postmodern” family perspective reveals cultural implications which are relevant for HC families. Postmodernism incorporates flexibility in its consideration for thinking about the variable positionality of family members. A postmodern outlook views reality as constructed within diverse belief systems, without one fixed way of being (Hertlein, Lambert-Shute & Benson, 2004). Such a perspective can assist in understanding HC family issues to be multifaceted, requiring skilled understanding of parent-child behaviours and their subsequent responses within their own cultural context.

Attachment theory offers some help in understanding how and why parental attention might act as an incentive to children in changing their behaviours (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1442). Existing literature correlates the effect of discord to child well-being by means of attachment concepts. Multiple studies link the positive effect of constructive parenting behaviours to actions that serve to shield children from the adverse effects of conflict (Davies, et al., 2002; Skopp, et al., 2007). Secure attachments with parents assist children to develop positive self-esteem, and perhaps the ability to defend themselves by separating the parental issues from their own (DeBoard-Lucas, et al., 2010).

Scott and Dadds (2009) advocate for the use of attachment concepts as supplementary to programs anchored in social learning theory (p. 1443). Interventions which utilize attachment concepts intentionally acknowledge the positive effect and emotional importance of the child having a secure and trusting relationship with a parent (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1443). They also integrate appreciation for the reality that some parents may have experienced poor attachment to their own parents, which now impacts their current ability to confer trust to their own children (Scott & Dadds, 2009, p. 1443).

Emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1998) is a mid level theoretical framework which examines the consequences for child and family functioning of direct and indirect parental

conflict in the context of the nuclear family. The emotional security of children is believed to be undermined in situations where there is intense and chronic conflict, creating a climate of uncertainty for children within the family which can lead to later maladjustment (Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 15). Destructive parental behaviours which threaten security include physical and verbal anger or aggression, use of insults, and withdrawal or avoidance (Cummings & Schatz, 2012; p.17). Thus, emotional insecurity accounts for future maladjustment, as children emotionally and behaviourally react in an effort to preserve their emotional stability (Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 15).

The purpose of this research was to examine existing services available for parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation, with a focus on services, as a means for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning. An important part of the rationale for the study of these issues is located within the combined theoretical foundations of social learning, attachment and emotional security theories. In considering interparental conflict, each of these theories have a shared interest in understanding how children are impacted by parental conduct, perhaps answering Amato's (2010) pressing question of "how and under what circumstances does divorce affect children either positively or negatively?" (p. 658). While exploring existing literature, theory and also the actual community services available for post-separation conflict situations, it became apparent that a clearly defined focus on positive child outcomes was lacking as a basis for services. Cummings and Schatz (2012) echo this assertion and offer an up-to-date overview of evidence-based interventions for families involved in post-separation conflict circumstances (Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 24).

### **Methodology**

This study used a qualitative, cross sectional exploratory design (Dudley, 2005). The aim was to better understand the service needs, as well as the perceptions of professionals regarding

services available to parents in post-separation high conflict circumstances. The qualitative information was collected through a total of ten open-ended interviews using the general interview guide approach. The objectives stated in the preceding section formed the basis for developing the questions asked in the interview.

A purposive, snowball sampling method was employed to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling involves selecting the participants on the basis of the characteristics that are relevant for the research design (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2006). The researcher accessed the initial population through existing Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) workplace collateral contacts. Several of these contacts could also have been found without the researcher's pre-existing knowledge, as many workers are in public community or agency listings. Permission was also granted from the MCFD to speak directly with social workers regarding their work experiences. Eight participants were interviewed face-to-face and two participants were interviewed by telephone.

The sample population included a range of professionals from the three communities of Maple Ridge, Abbotsford and Chilliwack, located just outside the lower mainland area of Vancouver, British Columbia. Participants included two child welfare social workers, two parenting coordinators, three family justice counsellors, one parenting support family outreach worker, one clinical counsellor and one police domestic violence detective.

Following approval of Research Ethics at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) and approval from MCFD, potential interview participants were contacted by e-mail to request their involvement. Interviews were then conducted with those interested individuals who responded. All of the participants provided permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Interview duration averaged 45 to 75 minutes. For each interview, hand-written notes were also taken, with the full



knowledge and consent of each participant. To increase credibility and validity, the researcher reviewed the answer interpretations with participants to check for accuracy.

Open-ended interviewing provided flexibility during the discussion in order to clarify understanding of participant perceptions, and to probe for more comprehensive answers when shorter replies were given. Open-ended questions were intended to encourage responses which were detailed and descriptive, including examples of relevant practice experiences (Dudley, 2005, p. 241) – these were helpful in leading to relevant theme identification in the data analysis process.

The interview focus was on questions that inquired about experiences, observations, insights, and beliefs regarding their interactions with parents in high conflict situations post-separation (see Appendix A for Interview Guide). The variance in nature of professional experience of the participants was deliberate; the method was intended to incorporate a broader scope of professional experiences in order to increase the generalizability and depth of the data obtained. Parallel experiences observed over multiple professions in multiple communities will provide insight into the validity of the information obtained, despite the sample size being limited to ten participants.

Once all of the interviews were concluded, the audio-recording of each interview was reviewed and notes written to establish dominant themes stated in the interviews. A detailed thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring topics which included searching for clearly conveyed topics but also those that were obliquely understated by participants. For example, where participants were able to point out specific behaviours of parents, these actions may explain definite difficulties parents are having which are relevant to a service need.

The data from the audio-recordings was organized by looking at question topics to identify commonalities and differences. This process assisted in exploring connections between the topical responses and the outcome-specific service needs of the parents. Through these methods, the

researcher aimed to bring meaning to the information provided through the interviews. All recordings and notes were destroyed upon completion of the data analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research proposal was submitted for approval of the Research Ethics Board (REB) at University of the Fraser Valley (UFV). The process was supportive and constructive, albeit a lengthy process. The REB review stimulated thinking about issues that may not have been considered previously, including potential for harm to participants. Most valuable was the detailed inquiry regarding each step taken in the research development process.

As the participants are professionals who regularly work directly with clients, there were early concerns that there might be apprehension about interviewee anonymity. It was anticipated that participants might be concerned about breaching workplace confidentiality by discussing issues with the researcher. To counter this concern, the researcher assured participants of their anonymity through the informed consent process, explaining how the data was collected, stored and the plan for destroying the audio-recordings upon completion. While collecting data, no issues arose relating to worker confidentiality for any of the participants. Instead, there was an observable willingness to engage in discussions about this topic area, including providing examples of clinical experiences to back up viewpoints.

The most prominent, and unexpected ethical issue for the researcher involved the practice of interviewing professionals who were previously known to the researcher through workplace contacts, or who knew of the researcher's own professional background in social work. In the first two interviews, it was noted that participants seemed to provide broad answers to questions about their interpersonal practices, seeming to assume the researcher knew what was meant in more specific terms. The issue was dealt with in those first two interviews through the addition of more comprehensive and direct questions asking for specific examples of their ideas in order to ensure

understanding of the participant's viewpoint. The problem was addressed in later interviews by including a preliminary statement prior to the interview asking the participant to assume the researcher knew nothing about the topic area, and requesting responses be as detailed as possible.

In the majority of interviews, a debriefing period was required at the end of the interview. When the questions were completed and the recording equipment was turned off, almost all of the participants expressed an interest in continuing to discuss the issues of parental discord and service needs for parents post-separation. Topics included the quality of services available to parents, areas of variance for free services and those with cost attached, and the new family law legislation which has recently been passed in British Columbia. In nearly every interview, participants inquired about the data results the researcher had obtained up until the point of their interview and asked questions about what the information gained from this current research project will be used for. The researcher listened empathically and reflectively, provided some preliminary information to these questions, and offered a copy of the final research report when completed. While it was clear the interview had stimulated thinking about the topic area for the participant, there was no anticipated harm or risk on the basis of this kind of interaction.

### **Study Findings**

In the course of conducting this research and analyzing the resulting data, issues of subjectivity and objectivity were considered, without privileging one over the other. Qualitative research has subjective aspects to it within research design and analysis. This research sought inherently subjective feedback from participants. The nature and quality of the professionals' experiences were at the heart of the study. Thus, caution was exercised in data analysis, while acknowledging that interpretations of research data often involve some subjectivity of the researcher, research frameworks, and theoretical interpretations. The value and 'voice' of the experiences of the participants is held as a primary principle in the data analysis.

In examining existing services available to parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation, it was first necessary to ascertain the types of behaviours that are named as ‘dysfunctional behaviours’, exhibited in the parental interactions that could be assisted by intervention. For that purpose, the early interview questions focused on the distinct characteristics observed to be present in high conflict couple relationships, as well as the perceived obstacles for these parents in resolving problems. Parental behaviours identified as unconstructive were numerous, including characteristics of interpersonal dynamics, specific actions meant to incite or maintain the conflict and those which reflected explicit antagonism towards the other parent’s character or parenting style. Three central themes arose from the interviews involving behavioural and outcome topics for the parents and children of these high conflict post-separation families: (1) Poor Communication and Problem Solving Skills for high conflict parents, (2) Problematic “Personal” Characteristics for high conflict parents, and (3) Negative Child Effect of exposure to high conflict parents.

### **Poor Communication and Problem Solving**

Parents involved in high conflict post-separation circumstances were perceived and recognized to be lacking the critical relationship skills required to put an end to disagreements. Parents engaged in HC situations struggled specifically with general communication and problem solving deficits which were frequently characterized by angry interactions. Lack of communication was a common theme in the interviews, with numerous examples of poor communication and problem solving skills being described by all participants (see Table 1). The “characteristic interpretations” identified the perceptions of the participants as characteristics of the parents. These interpretations are constructed as a way of making sense of parental behaviours and involve naming them as inappropriate and non-functional.

Table 1.

*Poor Communication and Problem Solving Skills*

Characteristic interpretations	Examples of statements reflecting characteristic
Unwilling to compromise	"locked in power struggles"
Cannot communicate without fighting	"boundary issues", "can't separate minor from major issues"
Unable to accept personal responsibility for their own conduct	"refuse to listen to perceived criticism", "blame other parent"
Quick to escalate/highly emotional	"impulsive", "highly reactive"
Egocentric behaviour over-riding/ lacking empathy	"unwilling to consider other person's perspective"
Jump to assumptions	"immediately assume the worst about other parent's actions"
Accusatory of other parent	"may make false allegations"
Dismissive of other parent	"interrupt each other", "speak to parent in third person"
Making demands of the other parent	"you will..."
Verbal and physical threats/ Domestic violence	"if you don't...I will...", "pushing", "intimidating stance"
Verbal patterns of attack/defend	"name-calling", "criticizing", "belittling"
Refuse to speak to each other	"covert conflict"
Using body language to hurt/intimidate	"innocuous but has meaning between the parents"
Draw children into the conflict	"interrogate the children about the other parent or house"
Use children to communicate with other parent	"tell your mom, or tell your dad..."
Use language of ownership of the children	"those are my kids"
Turning children against the other parents	"alienation behaviours"
Parallel or divergent parenting	"absence of communication"
Disregard for feelings of children	"lose sight of what the children need"

The majority of participants believed poor communication was a critical issue for high conflict parents, often acting both as a catalyst for more conflict and as a tool for preventing one parent from actually listening to what the other was saying. The participants spoke about parents feeling anger and frustration, expressed in negative verbal, non-verbal and physical behaviours, which could be passive or aggressive in quality. Verbal forms of conduct included yelling, screaming, name-calling, belittling, ignoring and/or cutting each other off during conversation. Non-verbal behaviours consisted of declining to have eye contact, shifting their body away from the other parent, and/or refusal to speak to the other parent. Physical acts included pushing, hitting, standing in physically intimidating postures, throwing objects, breaking objects and/or throwing them. No matter what the actual behavioural expression looked like, most participants identified these patterns to be damaging to both parties, serving to ultimately lengthen and maintain the conflict cycle, as

opposed to ending it. These descriptions and responses about high engagement discordant traits are corroborated in the research literature as consistent with prolonging the discordant relationships (Sullivan, 2008).

An interesting exchange occurred when one participant was asked to talk about some of the positive and negative communication patterns observed in parents that get in the way of resolving conflict. The participant initially responded that there was no communication between the parents. In asking for more explanation, an image appeared of a couple who did not speak or come into physical proximity with each other, even in the children's presence. The children would leave the company of one parent and walk a distance from one to the other, thus avoiding communication. Intrigued, I wondered aloud if these efforts to avoid communicating actually represented a clear message of significance to the children. This led to further discussion, and a widening of perspective regarding what defined *communication* as well as the reality that communication between specific parties can in fact relay different messages to those watching.

### **Problematic “Personal” Characteristics**

Parents in high conflict post-separation circumstances were perceived to be different than the majority of other parents who engage in the separation or divorce processes. The HC parents were overwhelmingly ascertained to have major individual character ‘deficits’ that needed to be overcome in order to interrupt the conflict cycle. Consistent with the research literature (Neff & Cooper, 2004), participants in this study described these parents to possess psychologically destructive behaviour traits that were characteristic of personality disorders. These portrayals suggest some level of psychopathologizing of HC parents by the participants.

Central and contributing personality features were identified by the majority of participants, which may or may not be borne from the chronic conflict cycle they are engaged in. All respondents spoke to some degree about destructive characteristics attributed directly to parents which interfered

with their abilities to successfully resolve conflicts. Specific examples of parental conduct included a large assortment of purposeful conduct, as well as behaviours apparently embedded in the individual character of the parent (see Table 2). Nearly all participants viewed these traits as clear obstacles to any collaborative processes, and represented serious barriers for parents to overcome in order to be able to move forward in any conflict resolution process.

The majority of participants stated the personal attributes of these parents were unlikely to be overcome within the existing support system structures. The most common rationale for this belief was the observations by participants that there was a lack of clear identification of problematic traits by mental health professionals. Furthermore, they suggested that the current legal system provides insufficient clarity and accountability measures in order for parents to follow through with necessary psychological treatment plans. Participants had little faith that these HC parents would willingly follow the court's direction without being compelled to do so. Examples of situations where parents circumvented or flat out ignored the court's direction without any serious penalty were provided as support for their perspectives.

The majority of participants stated that the parental conduct involving purposeful manipulation for their own advantage was the most harmful form of behaviour. Furthermore, these behaviour types were considered to be least likely to be helped by existing services. Examples that the participants suggested included conduct such as premeditation, scheming, calculating, conflict seeking and fabricating experiences for their own benefit. It is useful to note that, in current literature, these kinds of traits are associated with the adversarial nature of court litigation processes (Henry, et al., 2011). Perceptions that existing programs were of no value in dealing with parents who possess these types of maladaptive personality traits were stated over and over again.

Table 2.

*Problematic 'Personal' Characteristics Impacting Conflict Cycle*

Interpretation of personal attributes	Examples of statements reflecting characteristic
High degree of narcissism or self-absorbed focus	"self-absorbed", "cannot put children's needs first"
Antagonistic behaviours designed for vengeance	"allowing child to do a previously unapproved activity"
Calculating, manipulative behaviours	"plan social activities during other parent's access"
Aggressive, hostile, destructive, conflict seeking	"does not ask, but demands the other to do things"
	"engage the children in disputes"
Passive, submissive, overly compliant, conflict avoidant	"agree to things that aren't good for kids to stop fighting"
Rigid and inflexible thinking patterns	"black and white thinking", "have distorted views"
Limited parenting skills	"don't understand children's developmental needs"
Attachment and personal boundary difficulties	"atypical attachment behaviour", "don't know how to build relationships with their children"
Diagnosed or suspected mental health issues	"borderline personality disorder", "narcissistic conduct", "obsessive, almost stalking behaviour"
Prone to Substance abuse and/or addiction	"using alcohol or drugs to escape"
Domestic violence factors	"controlling", "demeaning", "stalking", "abusive"

While not all participants had direct contact with children through their current roles, every response included the belief that parents had great difficulty controlling or adapting their negative behaviours in front of the children. Half of respondents had regular one-to-one interaction with children, and spoke of observing poor emotional regulation on the part of parents and/or children reporting mixed and conflicted feelings about the parental discord environment.

**Negative Effects on Children**

The impact on children of the parental discordant atmosphere was revealed as the final topic relating to behavioural and outcome themes. Parental conflict has long been associated with children's negative adjustment following divorce (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Recent research establishes conflict to be chronically high in twenty to thirty percent of divorces, with children struggling to cope with issues of family dissolution while also being exposed to the harmful effects of parental discord (Ravitz, 2011). The data collected in this study substantiates much of the research literature which connects unconcealed parental discord as a



noticeable contributing factor to negative child outcomes (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Dunn, et al., 2005; Malcore, et al., 2011).

Repeatedly throughout the interviews, all participants spoke about the harmful effects children experience through exposure to interparental conflict. It was a dominant theme, which was emphasized through multiple examples of situations observed directly by participants, or through stories family members have shared with them. Of significance also were their firm perceptions that HC parents are frequently unable to regulate their emotions enough to stop themselves from acting out their anger in front of the children. The research echoes the voices of participants in its emphasis on the ways exposure to destructive forms of parental discord leave children feeling powerful negative emotions which frequently lead to internalizing or externalizing disorders (Ayoub, et al., 1999; Lee, 2001, p. 146).

Data regarding professionals' perceptions about the effects of parental conduct on children was categorized into two core areas of damage: emotional and environmental. Emotional harm was emphasized as significant by all participants, and described to be exhibited through children's internalizing processes. Participants pointed to areas of impairment as observable in the children through examination of symptoms of depression, withdrawal, emotional insecurity, anxiety, obsessive traits, sleep irregularities, academic underachievement, eating problems, and other assorted somatic complaints.

Also fitting within the category of emotional negative effect were factors of estrangement of children from one parent. The majority of participants spoke of these circumstances as "alienation factors," described as situations where "children are pressured to align with one parent," and resulted when parents "lose sight of what the children need." The process by which children would hold themselves responsible, "feeling torn" or "scared to show love or have fun with the other parent" was viewed as contributing to further emotional injury.

The category of environmental harm was associated with child behaviours which were described to be exhibited through children's externalizing processes. Typical behavioural manifestations for children included "acting out" with aggression, lying, having social problems with peers, development of mistrust in most personal relationships, acts of self-harm, and alcohol or drug use. Other behaviours depicted in this category included some forms of conduct typically viewed as pro-social, yet were identified by participants as negative for children when present at the same time as high conflict. These included taking on caregiver roles, academic overachievement, high levels of personal organization and superior capacity for self-regulation or self-supervision.

A minority of participants spoke about situations where parents refused to bring children to social or sports activities arranged by the other parent, did not follow through with homework or school activities during their own access visit times, or instances when the child did not receive necessary medical or psychological care due to conflicting views about such treatment choices. These examples were intriguing and seemed to represent indirect environmental circumstances which communicated the subtle ways parents can have a detrimental impact on their children.

### **Existing Services and Interventions**

Concerning existing services, the majority of professionals identified their first referrals to families were made to counselling, supervised access, community parenting and relationship or anger management programs, community or school-based counselling, parent education or women's transition house services. Counselling and supervised access services were highlighted by participants as most important and essential interventions for HC families. While both of these services were identified as key to reducing harm for children, they were also not available to many families due to cost. Community education programs specifically meant to address parental conflict were said to be frequently not available. The majority of participants stated their view about these programs being less reliable support services because there was no regularity of program offerings

and curriculum topics often varied by community and funding source. When asked specifically about services for families involved in HC situations, all but one participant recognized the Family Justice Counselling (FJC) services offered through the Ministry of the Attorney General as appropriate sources of assistance. Interestingly however, half of those interviewed were unable to state precisely what services were offered by FJC professionals.

All participants expressed a belief that services for managing high conflict situations should be free, widely known, and accessible to all. The majority of participants expressed a high degree of helplessness through their statements of not knowing where to turn for services which would help alleviate issues for families experiencing HC post-separation issues. While stating the need for specific services for HC families was obvious to them as working professionals, participants were less sure that these needs were fully recognized or understood by those with the power to implement changes. Further, dissatisfaction was expressed by participants about the lack of clarity regarding whose role it was to provide these services to families. Half of those interviewed did not believe full responsibility should lie with the Attorney General's Ministry or legal services sector, because of their inherent focus on reducing court times, and perceived lack of expertise in managing therapeutic issues.

The only program identified as accessible to all parents, regardless of socioeconomic status or resident community was the Parenting After Separation (PAS) program, offered by the Attorney General's Ministry. Most interviewees considered the FJC office to be the primary pathway for access to the PAS program, and were unaware that parents could refer themselves to the program, or access it through online resources. All but one participant knew about the PAS program. Of those who did know, there was less certainty expressed about its capacity to effectively address the specific issues experienced by parents in HC situations. Criticisms by participants of the PAS program included the limited ability to address HC issues due to its short length; the durability of

typical issues that high conflict couples struggle with were not believed to be compatible with the half day program. These views are consistent with research literature, which positions common court education programs as largely ineffective due to their narrow scope and duration (Geelhoed, et al., 2001), and suggests divorce education programs should increase the duration and overall program length, expand to include follow-up support, and incorporate other family members (Brandon, 2006, p. 182).

Eight participants suggested that the PAS was most relevant for high-functioning parents who did not struggle with poverty, lack of education or other social issues. Also, the mandatory nature of the program (when involved with court) was suggested as presenting a barrier to some parents, who might not be psychologically ready or willing to learn how to end the interparental conflict. Other more appropriate intervention practices were identified by participants, such as mediation and parenting coordination services. The majority of participants had observed success with these collaborative options in the past; however several remarks focused again on their inaccessibility to all parents due to cost or awareness factors.

The participants suggested that mediation services for parents in conflict but who were not engaged in the court process was an obvious need that was not being met. Most participants stated that they were unaware these parents might have access to mediation services without court involvement through FJC services. Those that were knowledgeable of FJC mediation pointed to two main existing barriers in these services: first, those families engaged in elevated levels of conflict were often rejected as unsuitable for FJC services and referred to the court instead, and second, mediation issues were narrow in scope and frequently did not include assistance in managing ongoing conflict situations.

Participants identified current judicial responses to be inadequate for those families who were actively involved in litigation. Half of the participants recommended all family court judges

receive training regarding the factors involved with HC post-separation parenting situations and parental alienation factors. Knowledge about the interaction patterns for these families was identified as crucial training content in order for judges to intervene in a timely and effective manner for children's best interests. Participants also made recommendations for improvement in the court process which included having the judge take a more active role in seizing cases where persistent parental conflict issues existed.

Systemic and societal issues impacted the ability for families to connect to resources, and for professionals to be helpful in offering suitable services. All participants spoke about the effect of structural issues as obstacles for HC families; issues of low socioeconomic status, unemployment, inadequate housing, unhealthy support systems, childhood history of abuse or trauma, substance abuse, and patterns of domestic violence. For example, participants perceived that parents with lower incomes, poor housing and past involvement with child welfare services were less likely to know about their rights, or reach out to community supports on their own. All participants routinely referred HC family members to free services, stating they were frequently unable to refer people to services they may consider to be more suitable for the HC circumstance due to social constraints (cost, location, etc.). The systemic issues were believed to have an obvious instrumental effect on HC families and their subsequent ability to seek support.

### **Intervention Recommendations**

**Prevention services.** When asked what services are needed for helping parents in conflict after separation, the most frequent suggestion was for implementation of new prevention programs. All of the participant recommendations involved a variety of services which would operate as a means for not only preventing conflict in relationships, but also to assist individuals in society to manage social situations with less aggression and develop empathy skills. The majority of participants believed prevention should begin early in life, with children in elementary school being

provided with an assortment of social skills education programs. For instance, programs are needed for children to facilitate their understanding of what is normal when divorce takes place, and learn to be empathetic towards their peers. Half of participants suggested the broader implementation of social skills education in elementary and secondary schools, which emphasizes life skill learning, incorporating topics of respectful relationship communication, conflict resolution, understanding anger cycles and learning emotional regulation skills. One participant suggested secondary school students should be taught about marital relationship development. Similar programs were suggested for parents to help them prepare for what needs to be done should they decide to separate and how they can be emotionally supportive for their children.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, it was important to reflect on the responses proposing that children should receive vital social education away from the home environment as an intervention to assist in addressing family discord issues. From the perspective of the researcher, it is worth considering if the school was/is deemed to be an impartial venue that may assist in balancing any social or family disparities. More exploration should be made into this area of inquiry to gain a better understanding into the construction of these beliefs and their validity as a suitable intervention pathway.

**Support services.** Important future directions for services to support high conflict families were relayed during the interview process. All participants proposed some sort of therapeutic intervention be made available to HC family members. Most intriguing were the commonalities found within these suggestions, incorporating psychological treatment and healing remedies along with education of divorce processes and attention to the broader social issues. The majority of participants proposed complex, long-term, multifaceted services which incorporate education, training and counselling components. Half of participants included ideas for societal education and

awareness about poor divorce behaviours and their detrimental effects on children, as well as on the associated topic of what to do when deciding to separate or divorce.

More than half of the participants called for a multidisciplinary focus in interventions, whether they exist currently or not. Connections were made to the need for a collaborative model, which would allow families to be serviced simultaneously by four primary sectors: Provincial Court, Child Welfare, Police and Mental Health. This model would require that relationships be developed between various government agencies towards a mutual goal of increasing family functioning.

**Accessibility to existing services.** Interview participants consistently pointed to a distinct lack of long-term, cost-free and therapeutic services that are easily accessible for all parents, citing the need for widely accessible services, which address the variety of multiple complex issues specifically related to high conflict family situations. Counselling or some sort of mental health assessment and treatment was the foremost recommendation mentioned during all of the interviews. Although aware of community resources which offered sliding pay scales, almost half of participants stated associated factors for HC families which combined with cost issues to create barriers. For instance, parents engaged in HC situations may be directing all of their funds towards legal costs, lack an understanding of how counselling can help them, or have little time and energy to devote to such pursuits. Increased availability and awareness about free counselling services may help alleviate the harmful effects on children.

More than half of participants identified the specific the need for free supervised access and/or custodial transfer exchange support services for parents engaged in high conflict. Participants emphasized this need while describing their own experiences of vicarious distress. They spoke about observing situations where children were exposed to extremely chaotic parental fighting related to visitation or access exchanges. In some cases, participants acted outside their own professional

roles, providing supervised access facilitation for families due to their concerns for the children's safety.

Four participants were aware of Parenting Coordination (PC) services, and all participants made recommendations for services which align with the Parenting Coordination roles. For instance, they proposed multifaceted services which incorporated parent education, mediation and counselling components. Those participants who were knowledgeable about PC also suggested the professional role needed to have some sort of monitoring, enforcement or arbitration capacity as a measure of accountability for parents to follow through with the parenting plans made.

### **Policy Issues and Barriers to Service**

All participants pointed to policy issues as fixed barriers for accessing or implementing services needed for HC families. Throughout the study, participants clearly stated their concerns about the inaccessibility of high-quality services for high conflict parents. Their concerns were connected first and foremost to cost factors, and secondarily to regional availability. They spoke about lack of funding and availability of dependable services targeting explicit issues for separated or divorced parents who are persistently involved in HC situations.

Public attitudes towards divorce have softened considerably in the past two decades (Amato, 2001, p. 357). Family circumstances of separation and divorce have become normative events, despite recurring corroboration of its harmful effects on parents, children and the general public (Henry, et al., 2011, p. 455). Research has consistently demonstrated connections between divorce and negative adjustment for children (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych, et al., 2000; Henry, et al., 2011; Langan, 2011, p. 252). Despite these reliable reports of negative outcomes for children, custody and divorce issues seem to be granted a kind of immunity as contributory factors of damage and impairment for children, a process which seems to be legitimized through the current child welfare system in BC. Participants spoke of their frustrations in



trying to seek assistance from the child welfare support systems for parental conflict matters and being turned away. Four participants described specific policy issues to exist within the child welfare system. These involved inconsistencies in MCFD policy and implementation of practice with separated parents, variances by community in following policies that did exist (e.g., internal policy for working with separated parents), and a distinct lack of training for social workers to identify, understand and provide intervention for these families.

Participants who spoke about refusal of service by MCFD believed service denial by child welfare workers was due to beliefs about the legislative limits which affect child welfare social workers ability to intervene in all but the most obvious physical or emotionally harmful custody situations. In my own professional experiences as a child welfare social worker, I have found this to be true, with file involvement for HC families varying greatly by community. Decisions seem to be largely affected by the individual or collective leadership approach within a district office, instead of through evidence-based policy and procedure development. In the absence of a specific policy for dealing with high conflict post-separation issues, workers are left to make their own interpretations about situations where children have been or are likely to be harmed (Government of British Columbia, 2012).

Related to actual service delivery, there were also issues concerning continuity of service. Participants identified the need for support services that could address multiple complex needs over a longer time period, and could be delivered by one person or agency. This was unanimously viewed by all participants as a critical factor in identifying and addressing the deeper underlying issues for parents and children, to facilitate true transformation for all family members.

Barriers to service connection for parents were suggested by participants to have a strong association to financial resources. Money or related issues such as transportation, child care needs, or scheduling hours of programs for non-work hours was universally identified. Additionally, the

majority of participants believed many parents were unaware of the services that did exist, or how to access them. If they did know about them, it was believed the emotional state of the parent (grief, shock, and shame) may also interfere with seeking assistance.

Ideas proposed by participants about service needs for high conflict parents mainly involved suggestions for prevention services, with a focus on developing life skills. Two of the participants spoke of the ideal solution including the training of children and youth in communication, problem solving and relationship skills during their early school years. Most participants endorsed an intervention model which combined the psycho-educational component with a therapeutic module for all family members. The model was believed to best serve HC parents if it was a long-term intervention; first providing a psycho-educational segment, followed by practical assistance with availability to help out when conflict situations arose where support was needed to maintain the positive track.

Participant views regarding hands-on intervention needs for high conflict parents were supportive of the concepts known to exist in the Parenting Coordination models advanced in the research literature. Parenting Coordination (PC) involves the use of one skilled professional whose responsibilities include education, assessment, decision making and general case and conflict management (Deutsch, 2008, p. 60). Typically, the Coordinator operates alongside the court process to ensure parties abide by and/or work together to modify parenting plans, teaches them to communicate with each other after separation, and helps encourage positive relationships for each parent with their children (Barsky, 2011, p. 8; Deutsch, 2008, p. 60; Henry, et al., 2011, p. 464; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007, p. 370). With the inclusion of PC interventions in the new *Family Law Act*, I am encouraged that there is a level of corroboration within the governmental spheres and advancement of PC as a trustworthy model for upcoming intervention for HC families.

### **Research Limitations**

When first considering the research project, a study was imagined that would incorporate the direct and personal views of parents who were engaged in conflict, or had been in the past. Unfortunately, the scale of such a project was too large to be accomplished in a Masters level student research undertaking. Therefore, the project was re-directed to concentrate on the views of professionals who come into contact with the parents. While this approach meant the individual views of parents could not be included, it provided an opportunity to hear from the parents indirectly through the observations of professionals. An advantage of such an approach is that trained professionals could hone in more precisely on the explicit needs of parents because of their practiced skill, and also their emotional distance from the parental conflict issues. A disadvantage of this research methodology lies in its narrow focus of considering existing parental functioning. It does not allow inclusion for factors related to the parent's personal relationship pattern or childhood trauma history influences.

A limitation of the study was the relatively small number of people who participated in the research project about a broad and complicated topic area. While the proposal began with ten interviews planned, it was apparent that many more could have been included as the interview process unfolded. Several other professionals identified themselves as interested in participating upon learning of the research topic, however, the time constraint and scope limitations for a MSW student research project limited the ability to adapt the study and increase the amount of people who could be interviewed. Instead, the decision was made to include a spectrum of professionals who could be scheduled for interviews within the timelines. With the ten participants, in-depth data was collected. An in-depth interview of ten participants is considered to be a good number for qualitative data (Creswell, 1998). Also, the selection of participants from different workplace settings and communities assisted in validating the data should it yield similar results (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Another area of limitation is connected to an issue identified above in relation to ethical considerations. The practice of interviewing professionals who already knew the researcher through workplace relationships had the potential to restrict the depth and content of information provided, as the professionals may well assume universal social work principles, skills, or perspectives were already known and recognized. Attempts to minimize the effect of this circumstance included the use of redirection and asking participants to state examples to illustrate their viewpoints. Additionally, a preliminary interview statement was introduced, requesting that the participant assume the researcher knew nothing about the topic area and invited comprehensive responses.

Lastly, the study does not address any aspects of culture which may affect service availability for parents in high conflict post-separation. Despite the researcher's common awareness that the dilemmas faced by parents would very likely differ across cultural spectrums, there were no questions asked in the interviews that addressed the experiences of professionals regarding cultural awareness or knowledge. Interestingly, no cultural issues were spontaneously identified by professionals either. The issue of cross-cultural differences is a critical one, especially given that the views of a culturally diverse client base were mediated by "professionals" for whom cultural factors were invisible. Discussions regarding power relationships between parents and service providers did not include any issues of ethnicity or cultural customs which may affect family life.

The omission of cultural aspects from the interviews was deliberate. Given that the existing literature about service needs in the British Columbia context for high conflict parents is very sparse up to now, the decision was made to focus first on seeking universal information regarding beliefs of professionals about the needs of the overall parent conflict population, rather than divide the focus of the study. It is important to note however, that the exclusion of cultural factors does not exclude their importance as part of those universal needs, especially if the client was not Euro-Canadian, but rather of Indigenous, Indo-Canadian or African origin, for example. An exploration of culture is

recommended for future research as it remains an important factor for the study of family interactions.

### **Current Theory, Practice and Policy Implications**

Social determinants are described as the living conditions people experience as they live their lives, and have been connected to the physical health of Canadians (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The identification of these determinants is helpful in understanding the systemic inequities Canadians experience, taking into account the living conditions or structural circumstances of individuals and families such as income, education, employment or working conditions, housing, race, gender, and disability (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The social determinants which impact HC post-separation parenting is an important area which cannot be undervalued when considering intervention service needs for these families.

Financial constraints placed on Canadian social programs create genuine barriers to developing and implementing quality evidence-based services which meet the needs of all family members (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Ungar, 2005, p. 460). In addition, professionals often create programs, utilizing their own social position and value systems as guiding principles (Ungar, 2005, p. 461). Children, in particular, who observe their parents in HC interactions should be active participants in the interventions that are intended to help them, an opinion echoed by Ungar (2005), who suggests children are in the best position to understand what their needs are (p. 457). More research which includes input from those most affected by the service delivery is needed to ensure services meet the actual needs of those meant to be helped.

Current theoretical underpinnings of services for high conflict parents appear to focus on social learning concepts. Programs concentrate on education of the parent, so that parents may then teach children new behaviours through imitation and reinforcement methods; a process which fails to consider the context of the family circumstances. Yet, research demonstrates these methods lack

empirical basis (Cummings & Schatz, 2012; Geelhoed, et al., 2001). Service provision that meets the needs of parents and children should instead be rooted in a translational research approach (Cummings & Schatz, 2012, p. 18), where program development is based on relevant and proven research findings.

One of the biggest barriers for parents seeking help is the demarcation of family law matters from child well-being issues, which then impacts social policy and practices; a process which is confirmed through a thematic analysis of the research. It would seem Western societies do not openly regard divorce and separation processes as problematic mechanisms for potential harm to children. Instead, there exists an underlying collective acceptance that children will be harmed, assisted through the common societal approval of divorce. As a result of these views, children continue to be damaged. A by-product of these ideologies is evidenced in the clear disparities between legislative authority, social policy and connected practices.

The “best interests of the child” principle governs the legislation in the provincial *Child, Family and Community Service Act*, and *Family Relations Act*, as well as the federal *Divorce Act* (Government of British Columbia, 2012; Ministry of Attorney General, 2009). Existing provincial family legislation does not require parents to make parenting plans when separating, nor does it provide any guidance for what to do after separating to ensure the care of children (Ministry of Attorney General, 2009). While the well-being of children is deemed to be the primary concern within Canadian law, this standard is at odds with the relatively easy process to separate and/or get a divorce, and the social acceptance of separation as inevitable.

Given the high level of interest of professionals in participating in this research as well as the recent implementation of the new *Family Law Act (FLA)* for British Columbia, it is imperative that a more comprehensive study be undertaken in the near future. Research demonstrates parents who are persistently engaged in HC do not only need education, but a more therapeutic approach to change

complex familial behaviour patterns (Grych, 2005). Ideally, new research would occur prior to the legislation implementation phase to ensure policy practice matches well with the needs of professionals and of the parents in high conflict situations.

The *Family Law Act* arose as a relevant topic in approximately half of the interviews in this research study, and is expected to be enacted in the next two years (Courthouse Libraries BC Blog, 2011). Within its core divisions, the *FLA* makes known a definite preference for collaborative practices (Government of British Columbia, 2011). Related to this research project and the topic of post-separation parental conflict, the *FLA* offers an explanatory note at the end of the legislative document stating implicitly that the new Act will, among other things, “promote family dispute resolution to resolve disputes” (Government of British Columbia, 2011). It will be important for these impending resolution processes to also direct their focus on evidence-based practices where positive outcomes can include constructive parent and child adjustment to separation and divorce, as well as improved court processes.

### **Conclusion**

This research explored the perceptions of helping professionals, providing a comprehensive review of practice experiences regarding the actual services available to parents, and the types of services professionals suggest that could be effective intervention approaches for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning. It was anticipated that the research process would make it possible to increase consciousness regarding the needs of parents and children in high conflict (HC) post-separation situations for the participants while they were being interviewed, as well as through dissemination of the results. This objective was accomplished, most readily observable by the high level of interest and number of professionals who wanted to be interviewed. Additionally, at the conclusion of the interviews each participant spoke about how this topic is one which needs more study and the addition of new services specific to HC families.

Through qualitative research methods, the study fundamentally sought subjective feedback from participants. The nature and quality of the professionals' experiences, or rather, their interpretations of their own experiences were at the core of the study. As a researcher, I acknowledge that I am also constructing an understanding of the research data from my own place, which includes my own subjectivity, research frameworks, and theoretical interpretations. The professionals who took part in this study have directly observed and interacted with families affected by high conflict. Their perspectives represent versions of their own reality, or "truths" as they believe to be accurate.

This research advances knowledge in the area of post-separation parental conflict through the participants input regarding gaps in services for families, as well as areas where further knowledge and research are needed. These contributions play an important part in developing future services, which may serve to reduce court times, while also assisting families in successfully adjusting to their post-separation lives.

Results from this study indicate there are many serious and significant gaps in service availability for families engaged in high conflict post-separation circumstances. The central importance of intervention services with content directed explicitly towards the particular needs of high conflict family members was a prevailing theme throughout the research. Participants were less sure that these needs were fully recognized or understood within the structural context of social services. Needs of individuals and families cannot be considered without incorporating an analysis of the structural foundations and social determinants which shape their lives.

Despite the inherent interplay between social issues and family functioning, the probable impact of societal demands and discourses of parenting have largely excluded consideration of structural issues as relevant. Instead, it is the individual traits of parents which are most commonly identified as needs or goals for intervention services. This is likely due to the complexities involved



in understanding the foundational elements of deeply-ingrained structural and societal issues. Despite the difficulty in developing evidence-based programs which are capable of addressing issues connected to socioeconomic status and social composition, these structural factors must be considered if intervention services for HC parents are to be effective.

As part of the research exploration process, it was necessary to establish the specific conflict behaviours and personal characteristics of parents, as well as the effect of inter-parental discord on children. While the literature has established the psychological effects on children of HC divorce, it has fallen short in establishing the psychological determinants of the problem for parents (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Donner, 2006, p. 542). This research offers new data about the perceived psychological traits of parents. Study participants described HC parents to possess psychologically destructive behaviour traits that were characteristic of personality disorders. These portrayals reflect consistencies in the literature regarding the actual traits, but are also indicative of some level of psychopathologizing of HC parents by the professionals. While these professionals are not qualified to fully assess the existence and effect of psychological features, their observations are important, and are likely more indicative of an identification of areas where adequate service is missing. Participants were clear in their statements about the absence of much needed mental health services, and their desire to truly help these families navigate through their post-separation experiences.

While parental conflict has long been associated with children's negative adjustment following divorce (Sullivan, 2008, p. 9), the actual separation combines with the resulting post-separation experiences in impacting children's adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Interviews of professionals in this research confirmed the critical effect of post-separation experiences for children. All participants stated concrete examples of situations where children were exposed to interparental conflict, with negative consequences. The HC parents were noted to be

frequently unable to regulate their emotions enough to stop themselves from acting out their anger in front of the children. Both this study and the research literature collectively inform on the need for parents to stop from engaging in direct conflict (physical and verbal) in order to protect children from harm. Current intervention supports are composed of “disconnected” legal and family support structures. The data from this study suggests that family law matters cannot be separated from child well-being issues. Instead, therapeutic interventions should be considered in coordination with legal matters. The results of this study offer relevant insight from professionals directly involved with HC families and their ideas for promising new intervention solutions with goals directed at reducing or eliminating persistent parental battling, while also maintaining child welfare and safety.

It was apparent through the interview process that the current intervention systems were not believed to be adequate in addressing the particular psychological difficulties of the HC experience. Awareness of current services was generally not rated to very high. While the services in place were considered effective for many families, specialized needs were believed to exist for those parents engaged in HC situations. Additionally, these HC circumstances were believed to be highly damaging to children. Over and over again, participants pointed towards deficits within the current systems in their ability to effect change in reducing parental conflict in HC situations. These results were consistent with current research literature, which situate HC divorces as very different from other divorces due to their ongoing hostile interactions and persistent court involvement (Malcore et al., 2010).

In situations where the personal attributes of parents were identified as the primary barriers for a high conflict family, the majority of participants believed it was unlikely the overall family circumstance could be improved within the existing support system configurations. This data suggests a change in the social system is required. These findings are consistent with other research where HC parents were noted to exhibit behaviours which appeared resistant to resolution through

standard intervention methods, such as mediation, parenting or divorce education and counselling (Neff & Cooper, 2004).

Although not anticipated, I found the results of this study to actually reflect some of my own clinical practice experiences as a social worker. It was interesting to have the empirical evidence echo situations I experience in my everyday practice. Most notable was the lack of connection between legal and therapeutic family support systems. Parents who are alert and responsive to the negative impact the discord is having on their children may still experience struggles as they endeavor to navigate between the systems, in order to successfully facilitate positive adjustment for themselves and their children. The importance of providing long-term and multi-faceted forms of therapy for high conflict family members cannot be understated.

### **Future Research**

In reviewing the findings of the literature and this research study, it is clear that further evidence-based and qualitative research is needed in the area of high conflict family intervention programs. While common current interventions for navigating separation and divorce primarily consist of divorce education programs and dispute resolution processes such as mediation or court case conferences (Amato, 2010, p. 660) and research demonstrates divorce programs are enhanced by linking together with community supports (Brotherson, et al., 2010), input should be sought from community stakeholders and mental health professionals who have ongoing and direct contact with these families with the goal of ensuring the program content meets the practical needs of participants. Furthermore, empirical research can act to effectively guide social work practice about the psychological influences of parental conduct and their specific treatment needs, helping to ensure social workers, and other professionals have the necessary knowledge and critical skills to assist them in intervening more effectively with parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation.

Since the court and government systems derive legitimacy from scientific and evidence-based research, frequently using it as a guide for future policy and practice directions (Department of Justice Canada, 2004; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007), it will be important for a more intentional focus on family and parenting conflict within the research literature. Only then will progress be made in providing services that are targeted to address the complex needs of all family members engaged in post-separation high conflict situations.

## *Appendix A*

### Interview Guide

#### Background Information

Male/Female

Age

Educational Background and credentials, including the graduating year

Professional role or Job title

Years working in this position

Do you have any specific training (beyond education) regarding working with parents in conflict situations?

#### Working definition of High Parental Conflict is:

High conflict separation or divorce is characterized by open expressions of emotional hostility, poor problem solving, and regular, unrelenting patterns of ongoing disagreement about numerous issues (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). These parents commonly engage in black and white thinking, and are unresponsive to standard resolutions or interventions, such as counselling, parent or divorce education programs and mediation (Neff & Cooper, 2004).

#### Interview Questions

1. In the course of your job, what kinds of contact do you have with separated parents in conflict?
2. What characteristics would you expect to find in a couple you would define as being in “high conflict”? (may refer to working definition above)
3. Please talk about your experiences of working with separated parents in conflict. What are some of the issues that you see, in terms of parenting and communication skills?
4. What have the ages of children been in your experiences with the parents?
5. In your experiences, how have you observed parental conflict to impact children?
6. What topics or issues do you find are recurring and require external interventions for parents to resolve?
7. Tell me about the personal characteristics or behavioural patterns you see in parents who require professional support to resolve conflicts.

8. What are some of the negative communication patterns have you observed in parents that get in the way of resolving conflict?
9. What are some of the positive communication patterns have you observed in parents that are helpful in resolving conflict?
10. To your knowledge, do these communication styles continue in front of the children?
11. Have you noticed any differences in the past 5 years regarding parental needs for managing post-separation conflict?
12. What services do you know about that are available for separated parents in conflict?
13. What services have you used (or made a referral to) for separated parents in conflict?
14. What difficulties prevent parents from connecting to existing services?
15. What services are needed for helping parents in conflict after separation?
16. What are some of the effective strategies you have used with parents to teach them to improve their communication patterns?

Any other comments

Probing questions will be used needed during interviews. For example:

- Would you give me an example?
- Can you elaborate on that idea?
- Would you explain that further?
- I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.
- Is there anything else?

*Appendix B*

## Informed Consent Letter



33844 King Road,  
Abbotsford, BC  
V2S 7M9

October 2011

**Informed Consent: Participation in Research Project**

**Title of Project:** Post-Separation Parental Conflict

**Researchers:** Diane Keegan ( [REDACTED] )  
Dr. Adrienne S. Chan ( [REDACTED] )

**Description of the Project:**

In collaboration with the School of Social Work and Human Services at UFV, we are conducting an exploratory research project of the needs and services of parents involved in post separation conflict situations.

The purpose of the research is to examine existing services available for parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation as a means for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning. The research includes an exploration of the perceptions of community professionals about effective programs that may exist to address and reduce parental conflict after separation, as well as determining if other interventions are needed to address the issues of high conflict for separating families.

**Participation in the Project:**

If you agree to participate in this research, you will take part in an interview which will take approximately 1 hour to complete. The total amount of your time required for this project should not exceed 1.5 hours. The interview questions are intended to help us understand your perspectives regarding services available and needed for parents in high conflict post-separation situations. You will not be required to disclose any confidential or sensitive information.

With your consent, notes will be taken and the interviews will be audio recorded. If you do not agree to be audio recorded, only notes will be taken. Recordings will only be reviewed by the researchers. The purpose of the recordings is to review the ideas, themes, and data generated in the interview. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no names, agencies or identifying information of participants will be used in the development of the summary data. As a participant, you will be given the opportunity to review the summary of what you said, and to clarify and revise your input.

Computer files will be password protected and the notes and audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. All raw data (recordings and notes) will be erased and destroyed on or before July 31, 2012. Summary (aggregate) data will be retained.

### **Consent:**

Participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Any data collected from you prior to withdrawal will not be included as part of the research project. There is no monetary compensation for participation.

There are no anticipated risks to your participation in this interview. The research will generate a needs analysis report on the current state of existing interventions for families dealing with parental conflict issues. A research paper would be the final product of this research activity. It will be submitted for approval as a graduation requirement for the MSW program at UFV. No names or identifying information will be used in the report. This will protect your anonymity. A summary report of the research will be available to you upon request.

Any questions regarding the research may be discussed prior to the commencement of the interview. Any questions about the project or any follow up may be directed to the researchers: Diane Keegan, [REDACTED]; and Dr. Adrienne Chan, [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Any concerns about the research may be directed to Yvon Dandurand, Associate Vice President of Research and Graduate Studies at University of the Fraser Valley, [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

**Thank you** for agreeing to participate in this research.

Please indicate your consent to being interviewed by signing the original of this letter.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I agree to the interview being tape recorded.

- I agree to participate in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.
- I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant



*Appendix C*

## Recruitment Letter



33844 King Road,  
Abbotsford, BC  
V2S 7M9

October 14, 2011

RE: Invitation to participate in a Research Study

Dear Colleague:

The needs and services of parents involved in post separation conflict situations is being explored as part of a graduate MSW research project at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV).

The purpose of the research is to examine existing services available for parents dealing with high conflict issues after separation as a means for reducing conflict and improving overall family functioning. The research includes an exploration of the perceptions of community professionals about effective programs that may exist to address and reduce post-separation parental conflict, as well as determining if other interventions are needed to address the issues of conflict for separating families.

As a professional who comes into contact with separated parents who may be struggling with conflict issues, I invite you to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will take part in an interview which will take approximately 1 hour to complete, and should not exceed 1.5 hours. The interview questions are intended to help us understand your perspectives regarding services available and needed for parents in high conflict post-separation situations. You will not be required to disclose any confidential or sensitive information.

Participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Any data collected from you prior to withdrawal will not be included as part of the research project. There is no monetary compensation for participation.

With your consent, notes will be taken and the interviews will be audio recorded. If you do not agree to be audio recorded, only notes will be taken. Recordings will only be reviewed by the researchers. The purpose of the recordings is to review the ideas, themes, and data generated in the interview. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no names, agencies or identifying information of participants will be used in the development of the summary data. As a participant, you will be given the opportunity to review the summary of what you said, and to clarify and revise your input.

Computer files will be password protected and the notes and tape recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. All raw data (recordings and notes) will be erased and destroyed on or before July 31, 2012. Summary (aggregate) data will be retained.

Any questions regarding the research may be discussed prior to the commencement of the interview. Any questions about the project or any follow up may be directed to the researchers: Diane Keegan, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

The interview questions have been reviewed by the UFV Research Ethics Board. Any concerns about the research may be directed to Yvon Dandurand, Associate Vice President of Research and Graduate Studies at University of the Fraser Valley, [REDACTED] or by e-mail at [REDACTED].

If you are interested in participating, please call Diane Keegan at [REDACTED] or respond by e-mail to [REDACTED]. Please provide a phone number where you may be contacted to arrange for an interview.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Diane Keegan, BA, BSW  
MSW Student  
University of Fraser Valley  
School of Social Work and Human Services

## *Appendix D*

### Certificate of Research Ethics Board Approval



#### Certificate of Research Ethics Board Approval

Contact Person Diane Keegan	Department Social Work	Protocol # 411
Co-investigators Adrienne Chan		
Title of Project Post-Separation Parental Conflict		
Sponsoring/Funding Agency None		
Institution(s) where research will be carried out University Of The Fraser Valley		
Review Date: 12-Oct-11	Approval Date: 17-Oct-11	Approval Term: 17-Oct-11 - 16-Oct-12
<p>Certification:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the UFV Research Ethics Board and the procedures were found to be in compliance with accepted guidelines for ethical research.</i></p> <div style="text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">Sandra Smith, Chair, Research Ethics Board</p> <p><i>NOTE: This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above noted term, provided there is no change in the procedures or criteria given.</i></p> <p><i>If the project will go beyond the approval term noted above, an extension of approval must be requested.</i></p>		

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