

Resolution

An e-magazine for family mediators across Canada



Welcome

In this issue:

Member
Spotlight

Upcoming
Opportunities

In Focus:
*Parent-child
contact
problems*

Annotated
Bibliography

Questions &
Answers

Practice
Considerations

Resources

Welcome to our summer/fall 2026 edition of Resolution where we turn our attention to a topic that is both deeply complex and increasingly visible in family mediation practice:

parent-child contact problems.

Across Canada, mediators are encountering more cases where a child's resistance to maintain contact with a parent cannot be understood through a single lens. These situations often involve overlapping dynamics such as family conflict, developmental considerations, past experiences of harm, attachment disruptions, and, at times, differing professional interpretations of what is happening and why.

For mediators, this presents a particular challenge. How do we remain child-centred while holding space for multiple perspectives? How do we assess readiness, safety, and appropriateness for mediation when the issues are layered and, at times, contested?

And how do we support families in moving forward when trust has been strained or broken?

In this edition, we have compiled research, practice insights, and diverse perspectives to help us begin to unpack these questions. Rather than offering a single framework or conclusion, our goal is to support thoughtful, informed, and reflective practice.

As with many areas of family mediation, there are no simple answers. But there is value in slowing down, deepening our understanding, and learning from one another.

Thank you for the work you do.

We invite you to read, reflect, and engage with this important and evolving area of practice.



*Annalise Stenekes, M.S.W., R.S.W.
Executive Director, FMC*



Member Spotlight: Willow McLean

Willow McLean, M.S.W., R.S.W., is a registered social worker with the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, holding both a Bachelor and Master of Social Work from McGill University. With over 15 years of frontline experience in child protection, her work has focused on supporting children and families through complex and often high-conflict situations.

Willow is the founder of Atlantic Family Mediation, where she works with families navigating separation and parenting challenges. She is also a certified family relations mediator and a board member with Family Mediation Canada.

Her practice is grounded in the belief that social workers trained in family mediation are uniquely equipped to support families through both the practical and emotional impacts of separation. Drawing on her background in child protection, Willow takes a thoughtful, child-centred approach, helping parents move toward workable, respectful solutions during times of transition.



Upcoming Opportunities

visit www.fmc.ca/news for more information



Learn, Connect, Grow

Sept 9, Oct 7, Nov 4, Dec 9 -
Fall Speaker Series, a free
monthly webinar open to all

Sept 16, Oct 21 - Coffee Time
drop in with FMC members

Sept 22 - Seminar on *Parent
Child Contact Problems*

Oct 21 - Special webinar on
*The Ahluwalia Case: What
Evolving Intimate Partner
Violence Law Means for
Family Mediators*



Role Play Groups

These unique professional
practice groups are an essential
tool to develop confidence and
prepare for certification.

Participants receive feedback
and/or coaching in a flexible
format allowing an opportunity
to practice what you've learned
in training and connect with
other mediators across Canada.

New groups start in September!

FMC membership is required.



Annual Conference

Theme: The Human Dynamics
of Conflict: Exploring Grief,
Power, Scarcity, and Escalation
in Family Mediation

Date & Time: Fri, Nov 20, 2026
830-430 Mountain Time (MT)

In person: Edmonton, AB

Virtual: via Zoom (please
confirm your time zone)

Registration: opens Oct 1st

In Focus



Parent-Child Contact Problems (PCCP) in Family Mediation: Advancing from Labels to Child-Centered Solutions

by Michael Saini, PhD, MSW, RSW

Parent-child contact problems (PCCP) are among the most difficult challenges in family mediation. After separation, children may be reluctant, resistant, or unwilling to spend time with one parent. These circumstances often lead to polarization, with each parent offering conflicting accounts and their own view of the dominant cause of this strain. Mediators must avoid assigning blame prematurely and instead maintain a child-centered approach, helping families identify safe, practical steps before relational strains intensify.

The term 'parent-child contact problems' (PCCPs) is deliberately broad, capturing the observable concern without presuming causation. A child's resistance may stem from developmentally normative preferences, transitional difficulties, loyalty conflicts, high parental conflict, suboptimal parenting, a strained parental relationship, exposure to family violence, child maltreatment, restrictive gatekeeping behaviours, or a combination of these factors.

The AFCC and NCJFCJ Joint Statement on Parent-Child Contact Problems advises against premature labeling and emphasizes the need to evaluate all contributing factors before drawing conclusions (AFCC & NCJFCJ, 2022).

Adopting a broad perspective is especially critical in family mediation. Mediation facilitates communication, clarifies interests, and empowers parents to develop their own solutions. It is not intended to diagnose children, adjudicate the truth of allegations, or assign responsibility to a particular parent. Prematurely endorsing one parent's explanation can deepen polarization and compromise the mediator's perceived neutrality.

The central inquiry should shift from assigning blame to understanding the child's experience, identifying contributing factors, and determining arrangements that improve safety, stability, and relationships.

Mediation is most effective when contact difficulties are emerging or when parents retain sufficient capacity for structured problem-solving. Mediators can guide parents away from competing fixed narratives and toward observable concerns, such as events preceding transitions, the child's statements or behaviours, parental responses, and patterns related to school, extracurricular activities, communication, new partners, discipline, or exchanges. This shift from labeling to focusing on behaviour supports the development of solutions that are specific, measurable, and tailored to the child's needs.

Complete safety screening is imperative. PCCP may co-occur with intimate partner violence, coercive control, child maltreatment, substance misuse, mental health issues, or significant power imbalances. Trauma-informed research indicates that resistance or avoidance may signal actual or suspected threats, necessitating interventions following thorough screening and assessment (Deutsch et al., 2020). Mediation should not proceed in its standard format if a participant cannot negotiate freely or if the child's safety requires investigation, protection, or specialized assessment. Alternatives such as shuttle mediation, support persons, legal consultation, or referral to other processes may be warranted.

Mediators must distinguish between eliciting the child's perspective and imposing decision-making responsibilities. Children should have opportunities to share their experiences and views on matters that affect them; however, they should not be required to choose between parents or to determine parenting schedules. Approaches such as child-inclusive mediation, the Views of the Child process, or consultation

with a child specialist can appropriately incorporate the child's perspective. The goal is to understand the child's needs and experiences, rather than to use the child's statements as evidence supporting one parent's position.

Effective mediation plans are often incremental. Rather than mandating an immediate return to a contested schedule or allowing contact to lapse indefinitely, parents should consider gradual, supported interventions. These may include predictable communication, low-conflict exchanges, shorter contact periods, familiar activities, indirect contact, therapeutic support, or systematically planned increases in time. Plans should specify each parent's responsibilities, criteria for measuring progress, indicators of success, and review timelines.

Mediation can also address dynamics within the broader family system. A rejected parent may need support to respond without pressuring, expressing anger, or repeatedly seeking reassurance. The favored parent may benefit from guidance on how to communicate permission for the child to maintain a relationship with the other parent while still addressing legitimate concerns. Both parents may need to set clear limits on sharing adult information, questioning the child, monitoring communications, discussing legal proceedings, or involving siblings and extended family as intermediaries. Incremental changes in parental behavior can ease the child's experience of being caught between parents. mental health professionals.



Not all PCCP cases can be resolved through mediation alone. Severe or persistent resistance, contested allegations of violence or maltreatment, significant child distress, repeated violations of agreements, or the need for clinical intervention may require coordinated legal and mental health responses. Research and practice literature consistently characterize these cases as complex and advise against simplistic explanations and standardized interventions (Fidler et al., 2013). Mediators must recognize when the process has reached its limits and make appropriate referrals rather than persisting with ineffective negotiations.

Family Mediation Canada (FMC) is enhancing practice by supporting mediators in developing specialized competencies for PCCPs. Upcoming training will cover safety and family violence screening, comprehensive understanding of contributing factors of PCCP, maintaining neutrality amid polarized allegations, safely incorporating children's perspectives, developing graduated parenting plans, and collaborating with legal and

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Annotated Bibliography

featuring academic articles relevant to Parent Child Contact Problems

Bala, N., Birnbaum, R., & Farshait, J. (2024). Children Resisting Contact & Parental Alienation: Strategies for Lawyers in High Conflict Parenting Cases. Queen's University Legal Research Paper (2024-004).

Birnbaum and Bala examine how Canadian legal professionals use the concepts of parental alienation, parent-child contact problems, and resist/refuse dynamics. The authors emphasize that children's rejection of a parent may have multiple causes, including family violence, poor parenting, high interparental conflict, loyalty pressures, and the conduct of either parent. The article is highly relevant to mediation because it supports careful differentiation rather than relying on a binary "alienating parent" versus "rejected parent" framework. It additionally highlights the risks of applying contested terminology in legal proceedings without a comprehensive assessment. For mediators, the article supports neutral fact-gathering, attention to the child's experiences, and referral to specialized assessment where safety concerns or coercive control may be present.

Garber, B. D., & Simon, R. A. (2024). Looking beyond the sorting hat: Deconstructing the "Five Factor Model" of alienation. *Family Transitions*, 65(1), 5-31.

Garber and Simon critique simplified models that infer parental alienation from a child's rejection of one parent. The article stresses that contact resistance can arise from multiple interacting domains, including child-specific characteristics, parent-child relationship dynamics, transition conditions, parental behavior, and the broader family system. This system is useful in mediation because it encourages professionals to ask what conditions make contact difficult rather than focusing only on which parent is responsible. For example, a child's resistance may vary by exchange location, transition timing, the parent's communication method, or the child's anxiety. The article's principal contribution is its insistence on differential assessment. Its limitation is that a conceptual framework cannot substitute for a comprehensive clinical or family-violence assessment.

Johnston, J. R., & Sullivan, M. J. (2020). Parental alienation: In search of common ground for a more differentiated theory. *Family Court Review*, 58(2), 270-292.

Johnston and Sullivan attempt to move beyond polarized debates about parental alienation by proposing a more differentiated account of parent-child contact problems. Their approach recognizes that children's resistance may reflect justified estrangement, developmentally understandable preferences, loyalty conflicts, problematic parenting, parental influence, or combinations of these factors. The article is relevant to mediation because it supports a formulation-based process: the mediator or assessor should identify the mechanisms producing the contact problem before selecting an intervention. A negotiated parenting plan may be appropriate in some cases, while others require parallel processes, therapy, supervised contact, or court determination. The article is less useful as a step-by-step mediation manual, but it provides a strong conceptual basis for avoiding premature labels.

Madden, E. E. (2011). Long-term outcomes of child protection mediation on permanency for children in foster care (Publication No. AAI3429004) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas].

Evaluates the long-term impact of mediation on permanency outcomes for children in foster care. Using data from a Texas pilot program across 43 counties, Madden employed propensity score matching to compare 315 mediated cases with 315 non-mediated cases. Results indicated no significant effect of mediation or parental engagement on permanency or placement outcomes; unexpectedly, mediated cases took longer to reach permanency. The findings suggest that permanency is influenced by complex interrelated factors—child, family, agency, and court dynamics—beyond any single intervention.

Annotated Bibliography, continued

featuring academic articles relevant to Parent Child Contact Problems

Saini, M. A. (2019). Strengthening coparenting relationships to improve strained parent–child relationships: A follow-up study of parents’ experiences of attending the Overcoming Barriers program. *Family Court Review*, 57(2), 217–230.

Saini examines parents’ experiences after participating in the Overcoming Barriers program, a family-based intervention designed for strained parent–child relationships. The article is relevant to mediation because it stresses the importance of improving coparenting communication and reducing behaviors that intensify children’s attachment to one parent. It suggests that parent-focused intervention might be required before or alongside negotiations about parenting time. The source is especially useful for discussing mediation referrals and post-mediation supports. Its limitation is that parents’ reported experiences do not, by themselves, establish that the program causes improved child–parent relationships. The article should therefore be presented as practice-relevant follow-up evidence rather than definitive proof of treatment effectiveness

Singh, T., & Mader, J. (2025). Reunification, reconsidered: Presenting an integrative, single-therapist framework for resolving parent–child contact problems—*Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 51(1), e12745.

Singh and Mader review present approaches to reunification therapy for families in which a child refuses contact with a parent. They propose a flexible, three-stage, systemic framework intended to tackle the diverse factors that may contribute to resist/refuse dynamics. The article is relevant to mediation because it clarifies mediation’s limits: negotiation may help parents establish practical conditions for gradual contact, but therapeutic reunification should not be treated as a routine consequence of an alienation allegation. Intervention should be customized to the child’s safety, emotional experience, family relationships, and the parents’ functioning. The article’s strength is its recent synthesis and explicit attention to evidence-informed practice. Its limitation is that it presents a proposed framework and does not establish effectiveness through a controlled outcome study.

Sullivan, M. J., Pruett, M. K., & Johnston, J. R. (2024). Parent–child contact problems: Family violence and parental alienating behaviours. *Family Court Review*.

This article addresses the relationship between family violence and behaviours that may undermine a child’s relationship with the other parent. It treats parent–child contact problems as a spectrum and cautions against assuming that resistance or refusal has a single cause. The article is notably valuable for family mediation because it places safety screening and contextual assessment at the centre of intervention planning. Mediators should consider whether alleged alienating conduct is occurring alongside coercive control, whether a parent’s protective actions are being mischaracterized as alienation, and whether the child has independent reasons for resisting contact. The article supports differentiated responses instead of one-size-fits-all enforcement, reconciliation, or parenting-time solutions.

Fidler, B. J., Bala, N., & Saini, M. A. (2013). *Children who resist post-separation parental contact: A differential approach for legal and mental health professionals*. Oxford University Press.

This interdisciplinary book examines children who resist or refuse contact with a parent after separation and distinguishes among several possible explanations, including justified rejection, affinity, alignment, attachment-related difficulties, and alienating behaviours. The authors argue that professionals should conduct a differential assessment rather than assume that contact refusal demonstrates parental alienation. This source is particularly relevant to family mediation because it supports early screening, child-focused information gathering, risk assessment, and differentiated intervention. It additionally emphasizes that the child’s views must be considered in context and that mediation may be unsuitable where there is family violence, coercion, or a serious power imbalance. The book’s principal strength consists in its integration of psychological, legal, and social-work perspectives. Its limitation is that some terminology and intervention debates have developed since publication, so it should be read alongside more recent family-violence-informed literature.

Q & A

Q: What are parent-child contact problems?	A: <i>Parent-child contact problems occur when a child resists, refuses, or struggles to spend time with a parent or caregiver. The reasons can vary widely and may include developmental factors, family conflict, changes following separation, loyalty conflicts, strained relationships, safety concerns, or other experiences that affect the child's willingness or ability to engage.</i>
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Q: Can mediation help when a child is refusing contact with a parent?	A: <i>In some cases, yes. Mediation can provide a structured environment for parents to better understand the factors contributing to the contact problem and explore possible solutions. However, mediation is not appropriate in every situation. Careful screening is essential to assess issues such as safety, family violence, coercion, or other factors that may affect the suitability of the process.</i>
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Q: What role does the mediator play in cases involving parent-child contact problems?	A: <i>Mediators do not determine why a contact problem exists, nor do they make decisions for families. Their role is to facilitate communication, support informed decision-making, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and help participants explore options that promote the child's well-being while respecting the limits of the mediation process.</i>
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Q: Should children's voices be considered in mediation?	A: <i>Yes. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes a child's right to express their views in matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity. In family mediation, this does not mean children are asked to make decisions or choose between parents. Rather, mediators may use a range of child-inclusive approaches to better understand a child's experiences, wishes, concerns, and needs. Importantly, children also have the right not to express their views, and that choice should be respected. The goal is to ensure children's perspectives are meaningfully considered—whether directly or indirectly—alongside other factors that support their safety, well-being, and best interests.</i>
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Practice Considerations

Navigating Parent–Child Contact Problems: What Different Mediation Models Can Teach Us

by Fabiola Menares

Consider a situation in which a 13-year-old has increasingly resisted spending time with one parent. The residential parent believes the child is anxious and needs stability, while the other parent believes the child may be influenced against them and fears losing the relationship. The parents arrive at mediation with very different explanations of what is happening. The same parent–child contact problem can be understood very differently depending on the mediator’s theoretical lens.

When safe and appropriate, interest-based, circular-narrative, and transformative approaches can offer complementary perspectives that help families move beyond entrenched positions. Drawing on these lenses can broaden the mediator’s understanding of the conflict, support constructive ongoing co-parenting relationships, and help parents make informed, child-centered decisions.

These approaches do not replace appropriate screening for safety concerns or careful consideration of the child’s circumstances and views.

One Conflict, Three Lenses

Each mediation approach offers distinct insights and tools. For example, both interest-based and circular-narrative mediation invite parties to share their stories and experiences but explore them for different purposes. Transformative mediation focuses primarily on the parties’ present interactions and their ability to move forward in their relationship.

Interest-Based Mediation

In this scenario, the mediator might explore each parent’s primary concerns:

- *What is important to you while raising your child across two homes?*
- *If you had that, what need would that fulfill?*
- *Why is that so significant to you?*
- *What do you think your 13-year-old needs at this point?*

In interest-based mediation, the mediator uses each person’s story to better understand their underlying interests, needs, and concerns. This understanding helps identify common ground and develop collaborative solutions that address the core needs of both parents and their child.

Circular Narrative Mediation

Circular narrative mediation examines the stories parents create about themselves, each other, their child, and the conflict, and how those stories shape their interpretations and relationships. It explores the meanings, emotions, identities, and cultural contexts behind these narratives, helping participants understand diverse perspectives.

In this scenario, the mediator might explore how each parent’s story about the other parent influences their interpretation of the child’s resistance. Exploring these narratives can help parents recognize how their interpretations shape their reactions and their child’s experience of the conflict.

...continued

The circular-narrative approach helps mediators reflect on their assumptions and recognize how personal, cultural, and professional perspectives influence their work. This awareness strengthens mediators' commitment to neutrality and impartiality. It also helps them stay responsive to each family's unique needs and support a decision-making process that promotes the children's best interests.

A narrative mediator may ask:

- *What story is on your mind about yourself, the other parent, your child, and this conflict?*
- *How do you think these stories may affect your child?*
- *Has there ever been a time when your child responded differently to the other parent? What was different then?*
- *Is there another way of understanding what is happening besides the explanation you currently have?*

Transformative Mediation

Transformative mediation supports empowerment, recognition, and self-determination. This approach is especially relevant to co-parenting relationships where parents must continue to communicate and make decisions that affect their children. Recognition does not mean supporting harmful actions or requiring agreement. It means understanding the other person's perceptions while respecting their autonomy, unique life experiences, and right to make their own decisions.

In the case of the 13-year-old, a transformative mediator would focus on how the parents' interactions affect their ability to think clearly and engage constructively.

A transformative mediator may ask:

- *What are you thinking and feeling when your child does not want to see you?*
- *What are you thinking and feeling when your child does not want to spend time with the other parent?*
- *How do you think the situation may be experienced by your child?*
- *Has anything you have heard today changed your perspective on the situation or the other person?*

Conclusion: Expanding the Mediator's Lens

Drawing on complementary approaches broadens the mediator's perspective and understanding of the conflict while maintaining the foundational principles of each tradition. This flexibility enables mediators to navigate complex family conflicts with confidence, help parties move beyond entrenched positions, and support more constructive parental relationships. Ultimately, the mediator's role is to create conditions responsive to each family's unique needs, promote parental self-determination, and support parents in making informed, child-focused decisions in their children's best interests.



Fabiola Menares

Chilean lawyer, mediator, conflict specialist, and member of the Board of Directors of Community Mediation Calgary Society. World Education Services (WES) assessed her legal education as equivalent to a Canadian Bachelor's and Master's degree in Law.

Practice Considerations

Working With Parent Child Contact Problems: A Collaborative Approach

by Shelby Segriff

In my practice, parent child contact problems bring parents into mediation holding opposing, deeply felt stories about who is to blame. Rather than asking who is right, I stay curious about the whole family system, meaning the child, both parents, and the professionals involved. Three things tend to move these cases toward outcomes that hold: a shared, curious lens between the parents, a collaborative process with lawyers, and a step-up plan built alongside therapy.

Each parent usually arrives with a clear story of what went wrong and whose fault it is. Rather than deciding which story is true, I help both parents wonder together about the child's experience. Can we separate cause from what happens next, since parents can often agree on a plan without agreeing on why things went wrong? What might this look like through the child's needs at their age and stage, rather than who is right? When a parent gets defensive, I try to name the worry underneath it.

I see lawyers as partners, not obstacles. They know their clients' history and serve in providing an important legal perspective, so I stay curious about their view of the case, invite them into planning early, and ask what risk worries them most and what has worked before. Court and therapy timelines often move at different speeds, so it helps to name that gap and align on pace together, and to talk through in advance how the plan might need to flex, so changes aren't mistaken for a breach.

A step-up plan gradually increases a child's contact time with a parent, based on milestones rather than a fixed calendar, and it works best built jointly with therapy. I anchor the plan to a qualified therapist with direct contact with the child, so my role is to share their observations of the child's needs to the parents. Observable signs, such as the child seeming more comfortable in session, often tell us more than a schedule based only on time. Keeping steps small and paced to the child with alignment from all professionals involved helps the parents remain steady when challenges arise as progress is not linear.

These three things support each other, much like the families I work with. A shared lens without lawyer collaboration can be undone by outside pressure. Lawyer collaboration without a credible therapy process leaves the plan without expert backing. And a step-up plan without a shared frame between parents tends to collapse at the first disagreement about pace. Holding these pieces as connected, not separate steps, is what tends to produce plans that hold.



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Resources

If you are interested in learning more about the topic of Parent-Child Contact Problems, we have compiled a few resources that may be helpful

AFCC and NCJFCJ Joint Statement on Parent-Child Contact Problems (Article)

This 2022 statement guides professionals on handling parent-child contact problems, cautioning against polarized labels without full case analysis.

<https://www.afccnet.org/Resource-Center/Center-for-Excellence-in-Family-Court-Practice/afcc-and-ncjfcj-joint-statement-on-parent-child-contact-problems>

Overcoming the Co-Parenting Trap: Essential Parenting Skills When a Child Resists a Parent (Book)

This guide by Moran and Sullivan offers scenarios and solutions for both "preferred" and "resisted" parents navigating a child's resistance to contact after divorce. Drawing on clinical experience, it provides practical strategies for supporting healthy relationships with both parents.

Five Things Family Law Professionals Should Know About Parent-Child Contact Problems (Blog)

This blog post recaps a webinar introducing the Parent-Child Relationship Concerns Checklist, a tool that assesses contact problems across five domains rather than an alienation versus abuse framework. It offers practical takeaways, including how to reduce anchor bias and match interventions to assessment findings.

<https://www.ourfamilywizard.com/blog/five-things-family-law-professionals-should-know-about-parent-child-contact-problems>



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*Thank
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