

Who are the high conflict families that require the services of an assessor or parenting co-coordinator?

A high conflict family is parents who have been unable to resolve issues pertaining to their post separation conflict. Most often these parents remain engaged with one another over unresolved matters. Unlike 'low conflict' parents who have disengaged with one another and have found ways to work through issues, the high conflict parent struggles with being able to 'move on' with their lives. They are often troubled by issues pertaining to custody, access, financial and/or parenting issues. There may or may not be a final court order that they remain dissatisfied with too. Also, there may be concerns that the children are unsafe when with the other parent. This can be manifested through repeated allegations of child abuse or a concern that the other parent is violent.

High conflict families frequently access the diverse but intersecting services of multiple agencies such as children's mental health services, child welfare, family counseling agencies, medical, police and legal services. Typically, these are not just couples who are arguing over a parenting schedule. There are a multitude of issues in dispute.

Usually high conflict is not about the children-it's about parental behavior particularly when or both parents demonstrates problematic behaviors. This can include talking badly about the other parent to the children or being combative with the other parent in front of the children. Fuelling the conflict always harms children and invariably will harm their client. Our job is to help our client move beyond the conflict to a less conflictual state.

It is postulated that 10% of all families going through a separation/divorce are deemed to be high conflict.

The goal of an assessment is to provide a clear understanding of the issues impacting on the conflict with a view to providing recommendations around a parenting plan. Some of the questions include the following:

- What will the parenting for the children look like in the future?
- What makes sense for the children?
- What type of relationship can the children have with each of their parents?
- What do the children's needs require of each parent?
- What type of safeguards need to be put into place when there are identified concerns raised about either parent?

High conflict cases are multi-faceted and complex. They should not be treated otherwise by professionals who are engaged to assist the parties and the court in attempting to define the needs of the children and the solution that best meets those needs.

High conflict cases do not lend themselves to simple solutions. Even if the court determines that alienation is either the complete or partial cause of the rejection by the

children of one of the parents, the court is still left with a complicated balance of considerations that keep the best interests of the children as the sole focus in any order.