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# Impact of Parental Interference on Children in High Conflict Divorce

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**IMPACT OF PARENTAL INTERFERENCE ON CHILDREN IN HIGH  
CONFLICT DIVORCE**

by

**Kelly Doyle Painter**

A Dissertation Presented to the School of Psychology  
of Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
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## DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

This Dissertation was submitted by Kelly Doyle Painter under the direction of the Chairperson of the Dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the School of Psychology and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology at Nova Southeastern University.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	v
ABSTRACT	1
CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	3
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	5
Divorce prevalence and child and adolescent mental health outcomes	5
The role of interparental conflict	5
The issue of visitation within high conflict divorce proceedings	7
An overview of the research literature on parental interference	8
Criticisms and methodological issues of research on parental interference	10
Prevalence of parental interference and impact on child/adolescent mental health	11
Summary, Purpose, and Hypotheses	12
CHAPTER III: METHOD	14
Participants	14
Procedure	16
Measures	17
Measures of background information	17
Identification of parental interference	17
Measures of child functioning, Parent-, Teacher-, and Self Report	17
BASC-2	17
Data Analysis	19
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS	21
Parental Interference vs. No-Parental Interference Findings	21
Preliminary Analyses	21
Analyses	21
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION	27
Study Strengths	30
Limitations and recommendations for future research	31
Clinical implication for forensic psychologists	34
REFERENCES	35

## LIST OF TABLES

- Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Family Members' Ages ( $N=55$ )
- Table 2. Mother's Race/Ethnicity ( $n=49$ )
- Table 3. Father's Race/Ethnicity ( $n = 52$ )
- Table 4. Parent's level of education ( $n = 55$ )
- Table 5. Parent number of previous marriages
- Table 6. Mother's BASC-2 report comparison between groups
- Table 7. Father BASC-2 report comparison between groups
- Table 8. Teacher BASC-2 report comparison between groups
- Table 9. Mother BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category  
(frequency/percentage)
- Table 10. Father BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category  
(frequency/percentage)
- Table 11. Teacher BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category  
(frequency/percentage)

# **IMPACT OF PARENTAL INTERFERENCE ON CHILDREN IN HIGH CONFLICT DIVORCE**

by

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Nova Southeastern University

## **ABSTRACT**

Parental interference in high conflict divorce cases continues to evoke much debate among mental health professionals in the forensic psychology field. Although over the past thirty years, some empirical studies have been conducted regarding the long-term psychological impact of adults that experienced parental interference as children, few studies have examined the impact that this phenomenon has on children during and immediately following divorce proceedings. The present study utilized an original data set that was collected with fifty-five families (e.g., mother, father, and oldest child) from de-identified reports completed by two private Court-appointed licensed clinical-forensic psychologists. The overarching purpose of the present study was to gain further insight into identifying the impact that parental interference had on the psychological functioning within the identified sample. Moreover, the first purpose of this paper sought to highlight the specific domains that children and adolescents are negatively affected by as a result of parental interference within the present sample. Overall, results yielded no significant differences between groups regarding reported (self, teacher, and parent report) elevations on BASC-2 outcomes for children and adolescents. However, the results of a step-wise regression analysis suggested that female children and adolescents were more

likely to have mothers rate them highly on the anxiety scale of the BASC-2. Limitations and suggestions for future research were discussed.



## CHAPTER I

### Statement of the Problem

High conflict divorce within this country continues to be a long and enduring issue that negatively affects families in various ways. Although the number of children and adolescents that are impacted by interparental conflict before, during, and after divorce proceedings continues to increase, a clear and comprehensive understanding of the short-term psychological impact that results from these proceedings has yet to be identified in the divorce literature.

Furthermore, while the debate regarding the appropriate terminology for describing and labeling parental interference continues among professionals, a thorough examination of the impact of this phenomenon on children and adolescents remains to be seen. This lack of understanding of the potential mental health outcomes may result in children presenting with poorer short-term and long-term psychological adjustment. It is the responsibility of mental health professionals working in the forensic psychology field to not only determine the typically associated mental health concerns that children and adolescents within this population exhibit but also to identify effective interventions to address the needs of these individuals. Previous research has highlighted adults who experienced parental interference as children report poorer psychological adjustment later in life. However, there remains a dearth in the divorce literature on the short-term impact of parental interference on children and adolescents. Thus, steps need to be taken to streamline and improve the process of accurately identifying parental interference, the short-term psychological impact it has on children and adolescents, and appropriate interventions to improve these outcomes in order to protect not only their wellbeing

during and after the divorce process, but their future emotional and mental wellbeing as well.

The current study aimed to examine the negative effects that parental interference have on children of parents undergoing a high conflict divorce. Specifically, this study seeks to compare differences between children who are identified as experiencing parental interference to those who are also involved in high conflict divorce proceedings with high levels of interparental conflict, but did not experience parental interference. It was predicted that children who have been exposed to parental interference would exhibit poorer psychological adjustment and functioning (e.g., internalizing issues, externalizing behaviors, social impairment, and poorer academic performance), when compared to children who have not been exposed to parental interference. Results from this study served to both highlight the role that parental interference plays on children, as well as the particular need for the identification of this phenomenon in order to intervene effectively on behalf of this population in the future.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

#### **Divorce prevalence and child and adolescent mental health outcomes**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), 43% to 50% of first marriages in the United States of America will end in divorce. Moreover, almost half of the children in this country will experience the event of their parents divorcing (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). Given the prevalence of parental divorce, understanding the factors that impact children's psychological outcomes continues to be a priority of clinical researchers and clinicians alike. In Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis of 92 studies conducted between the 1950s and the 1980s, 70% of studies reported lower well-being for children of divorced parents than for children whose parents had not divorced. Moreover, the divorce literature frequently reports that children are adversely impacted by parental divorce in the following domains: internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, quality of social relationships, and academic achievement (Cherlin et al., 1991; Amato 2001; Malone et al., 2004; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002).

#### **The role of interparental conflict**

Although the research to date has demonstrated the negative consequences of divorce on children, there has been extensive debate regarding whether these effects are better explained by exposure to interparental conflict or the event of the divorce itself (Lansford, 2009; Amato, 1993). Studies on the role of interparental conflict and its impact on children of divorced parents indicate that children who report high levels of conflict between parents are at risk for developing emotional and behavioral issues (Kelly, 2000; Grych & Fincham, 2001). A meta-analysis of 68 studies by Buehler et al.,

(1997) found that the magnitude of the association between interparental conflict and maladjustment in children was almost twice what was reported on the effect of divorce on children (Amato & Keith, 1991). Children that are exposed to high levels of interparental conflict exhibited lower self-esteem, internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, peer related issues, and reported feeling a loss of a sense of control (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Slater and Haber, 1984).

The literature also reflects that divorce disputes with higher levels of conflict are more likely to be involved in family court proceedings. Specifically, these divorce disputes typically address aspects of the divorce settlement as well as child custody (Grych, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Overtime, conflict tends to decrease in most families following the divorce. However, between 10% and 15% of families continue to exhibit high levels of conflict after the divorce is finalized (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The children in these families are at higher risk for poorer psychological functioning as compared to children in intact families (Grych, 2005). Moreover, children from divorcing families exhibiting high levels of conflict indicate several specific factors that contribute to poorer psychological outcomes. Recent studies have found that children that reported being caught in the middle of parental conflict (e.g., speaking poorly of the other parent, carrying negative messages between parents, and creating loyalty related conflicts for children) experienced poorer adjustment, increased internalizing problems, and worse parent-child relationships in comparison to children whose high conflict parents shielded the children from their issues (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Furthermore, Buchanan , Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) suggested

that there is evidence that it is not the level of conflict itself that negatively impacts child adjustment, but whether or not the children become involved in interparental conflict that is likely to cause poorer adjustment.

Child reports of feeling “caught” between parents have been discovered to be significantly associated with high interparental conflict and resulted in children’s adjustment difficulties, including increased internalizing problems and poorer parent-child relationships (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Specifically, when parents expose children to negative information about the other parent or discuss issues within the marriage with the child, it may lead to negative child emotional and behavioral difficulties (Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, & Raymond, 2002; Afifi, Boman, Fleisher, & Sareen, 2009; Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, Lee, & Escalante, 2004). Scholars suggest that divorce disclosures that are negatively valenced, hurtful towards the other parent, or place the child in an uncomfortable position have been shown to predict child psychological distress, negative physical implications, weakened parent-child relationships, and feeling caught between parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Afifi, Coho, & McManus, 2007; Koerner et al., 2002; Amato & Afifi, 2006).

### **The issue of visitation within high conflict divorce proceedings**

One way that children experience feeling caught due to interparental conflict involves cases where the custodial parent interferes with visitations between the child and the noncustodial parent leading to children feeling that they are responsible for causing or even solving these disputes (Healy, Stewart, & Copeland, 1993). Specifically, scholars have suggested the concept of gatekeeping as a prominent issue frequently noted in cases with high levels of conflict post-divorce that may result in decreased involvement by the

nonresidential parent, increased conflict between the child and their custodial parent, and a poorer parent-child relationship between the child and their noncustodial parent (Kelly, 2000; Doherty, 1998). Gatekeeping has been defined as a set of beliefs and behaviors that inhibit a collaborative effort between parents by limiting the noncustodial parent's opportunities for child care and rearing practices (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Within the subset of divorcing or divorced families that involve noncustodial visitation disputes, researches have also noted cases where children exhibit refusal to visitations and time spent with their noncustodial parent. Various terms have emerged in the divorce literature to explain cases where the child displays refusal to visit their noncustodial parent, which has led to an ongoing debate regarding its definition and causes (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). Among these terms are visitation refusal, parental alienation syndrome, parental alienation, and the alienated child (Johnston, 1993; Gardner, 1998; Warshak, 2001; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Although many children have legitimate reasons to refuse to spend time with their noncustodial parent due to previous exposure to domestic violence, abuse, or neglect, some children engage in visitation refusal that were found to be irrational or unjustified (Meier, 2009; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Garber, 2004).

### **An overview of the research literature on parental interference**

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) were the first to discuss the phenomenon of children rejecting, resisting, or refusing to visit one parent following parental separation.

However, overtime, significant debate on how to define and identify these children has emerged within the divorce literature. In the 1980s, Richard Gardner coined the term

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) to define a cluster of symptoms and behaviors frequently seen in child custody evaluations in which a child is resistant to have contact with their noncustodial parent. According to Gardner (1998), PAS is defined as a child's campaign of denigration against a parent that has no justification and results from the combination of two contributing factors: the programming or brainwashing by one parent and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent. PAS also includes programming of the child by the alienating parent. Moreover, he posited that children in high conflict divorcing families that are strongly aligned with one parent and reject contact with the other parent suffer from PAS. Cartwright (1993), Dunne and Hedrick (1994), Rand (1997), and Warshak (2002) have also written in support of Gardner's construct of PAS. Darnall (1999) utilized a number of Gardner's characteristics of PAS but simply referred to this construct as parental alienation (PA) without identifying it as a syndrome. He differentiated PAS from PA by noting that the latter focuses on the parent's behavior while PAS focuses on the behaviors that the child exhibits in cases where parental interference is present.

In an effort to reformulate the definition of parental interference dynamics, Johnston and Kelly published a series of articles where they redefined Gardner's construct of PAS and proposed a new term to define this phenomenon, the alienated child (Schepard, Johnston, & Kelly, 2001). The alienated child definition calls attention to the ways in which children can be adversely affected by parental behavior. Moreover, the authors defined the alienated child as a multi-dimensional process rather than a syndrome in contrast to Gardner's PAS. Specifically, these authors discuss a continuum of relationships that children have with their parents following separation and divorce. This

continuum includes children that have positive relationships with both parents all the way to children who openly express rejection of a parent without ambivalence with many types of parent-child relationship dynamics in between. Additionally, the authors go on to describe characteristics of the aligned parent and their role in parental interference (Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

### **Criticisms and methodological issues of research on parental interference**

Critics of PAS posit that Gardner's theory is circular in nature, lacks empirical evidence, focuses exclusively on the alienating parent as responsible for the occurrence of parental interference, is biased against women, does not meet qualifications for a syndrome, and may be used strategically by fathers in litigation to obtain custody from mothers who are attempting to protect their children from future exposure to maltreatment or abuse (Gould, 2006; Walker, Brantley, & Rigsbee, 2004; Meier, 2009; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Moreover the majority of the studies that have studied the more general phenomenon of parental interference include investigations based on case studies and do not provide quantitative evidence to support the construct of parental interference. To date, the construct of parental interference has been predominantly examined via longitudinal qualitative review methods and a marked absence of empirical support with quantitative data exists within the research literature (Baker, 2005; Johnston, 2003; Ziropiannis, 2001). Most of the publications exploring parental interference are reference books, theoretical essays, summaries, qualitative interviews, or anecdotal entries that lack empirical bases and cannot be generalized (Tejedor, 2006). There remains a paucity in the literature that examines parental interference with studies whose methodologies are based on replicable data gathering and not solely gathered from subjective, qualitative



data. Additionally, there is a need for researchers to conduct empirical studies that utilize a valid, reliable, and standardized instrument to accurately measure the construct of parental interference (Emery, 2005; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2015; Escudero et al., 2010; Johnston, 2003).

### **Prevalence of parental interference and impact on child and adolescent mental health outcomes**

Between 11% and 15% of children from community samples of families undergoing divorce have been found to reject or resist contact with their noncustodial parent (Johnston, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005). With higher estimates being reported in custody-disputing samples, where, as many as one-fifth of families exhibit characteristics of parental interference (Johnston, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005; Kopetski, 1998). Regardless of the term(s) chosen to label the problematic child refusal of contact with one parent, the literature has supported the adverse impact this phenomenon has on children and adolescents' psychological functioning (Kelly and Johnston, 2001; Fidler & Bala, 2010).

The majority of the research literature conducted on parental interference and resulting psychological outcomes includes retrospective studies with adults that identified experiencing parental interference during their childhood (Baker, 2007; 2010; Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee, 2001; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). However, less is known regarding the impact of interfering behaviors on children during and immediately following exposure to parental interference with scholars arguing for prompt and thorough evaluation when parental interference is suspected with a valid and reliable instrument (Ludolph & Bow, 2012). Some scholars have indicated that children exposed

to parental interference are at higher risk for a host of emotional, behavioral, and learning problems as well as adjustment difficulties and poorer parent-child relationship outcomes (Kelly and Johnston, 2001; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Bream & Buchanan, 2003; Siegel & Langford, 1998).

### **Summary, Purpose, and Hypotheses**

The purpose of the present study was to identify the specific domains of psychological functioning and adjustment that are negatively impacted when children are exposed to parental interference in high conflict divorce proceedings. The literature has highlighted a strong likelihood for children and adolescents that experience parental interference to experience behavioral, emotional, and academic difficulties due to the divorce of their parents. Similarly, anecdotal and qualitative evidence has suggested that children's mental health and psychological adjustment are significantly impacted by the experience of parental interference. With a greater understanding of the role of parental interference and the specific domains of psychological functioning in which it negatively impacts children and adolescents, relevant treatment interventions can be identified and implemented promptly by mental health professionals. Additionally, this increased understanding may lead to prevention and early intervention for children at risk for these outcomes in an effort to diminish the long term effects that have been supported in the divorce research literature.

In order to fill in the current gap in the literature regarding the immediate psychological adjustment and mental health outcomes of children in the midst of high conflict divorce proceedings, the current study aimed to examine the negative impact that parental interference has on children in comparison to those children involved in high

conflict divorce proceedings that do not experience parental interference. Specifically in an attempt to examine quantifiable outcomes of child adjustment when exposed to parental interference, this study utilized the Behavior Assessment System for Children-Second Edition (BASC-2) to identify the precise domains in which children and adolescent behavioral, emotional, and academic functioning is impacted. It was predicted that children and adolescents of families that reportedly engaged in interfering behaviors will have increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms as well as decreased social and academic functioning in comparison to children and adolescents whose families did not engage in interfering behaviors.

It should be noted the term parental interference was utilized in this study in order to acknowledge the multiple contributing etiologies and complex dynamics of the multi-dimensional construct of child refusal or resistance to visitation with their noncustodial parent.

## CHAPTER III

### Method

#### Participants

The present study utilized an original data set that was collected on fifty-five families (e.g. mother, father, and oldest child) produced by two private Court-appointed clinical forensic psychologists between 2005 and 2015. The role of the Court-appointed psychologists was to investigate and evaluate cases disputing child custody, parental responsibility, and time sharing for the family court in highly contested matters for divorcing and divorced parents. Each family had at least one child between the ages of three and eighteen years old. In families with multiple children, the oldest child falling within the aforementioned age range was included in the study. Furthermore, families with histories of founded allegations of physical and/or sexual abuse, neglect, or domestic violence were excluded from this study.

As shown in Table 1, the 55 mothers in this sample ranged in age from 20 to 58 years, with an average age of 39.9 years old. The fathers included in the present study ranged in age between 27 and 65 years, with an average age of 44.4 years old. The children were between the ages of 3 and 18 years old, with a mean age of 9.31 years ( $SD= 3.99$ ). Within this sample, 24 participants were males (43.6%) and 31 participants were females (56.4%).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for family members' ages in years.

Family Member	Mean	SD	Range
Mother	39.9	8.53	20-58
Father	44.4	7.83	27-65
Child	9.40	3.99	3-18

In regards to the race/ethnicity breakdown of this sample, 72 parents described themselves as Caucasian, 3 as African-American, 19 as Hispanic/Latino, and 2 as Asian-American. Moreover, 5 subjects identified as falling within an “other” category that included parents that identified as multi-racial or bi-racial, and three parents did not report their race/ethnicity (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2.** Mother’s race/ethnicity frequencies.

Race/ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
Caucasian	38	69.1%
African-American	2	3.6%
Hispanic/Latino	6	10.9%
Asian-American	0	0%
Other (Including Multi-racial/Bi-racial)	3	5.5%

**Table 3.** Father’s race/ethnicity frequencies.

Race/ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
Caucasian	34	61.8%
African-American	1	1.8%
Hispanic/Latino	13	23.6%
Asian-American	2	3.6%
Other (Including Multi-racial/Bi-racial)	2	3.6%

Level of parent education was identified and coded as a categorical variable. The majority of parents within this sample reported obtaining at least a high school degree (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Parent level of education frequencies.

Level of education	Mother		Father	
	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Percentage	<i>n</i>
Less than high school	3	5.5%	3.6%	2
High school	21	38.2%	32.7%	18
College	21	38.2%	38.2%	21
Graduate	10	18.2%	25.5%	14

As depicted in Table 5, information regarding the total number of previous marriages was also identified including a range between zero (e.g., never previously married) to 4, with 80% of the sample reporting having 1 or fewer marriages.

**Table 5.** Parent number of previous marriages.

Number of previous marriages	Frequency	Percentage
0	30	54.5%
1	14	25.5%
2	7	12.7%
3	2	3.6%
4	2	3.6%

### Procedure

Data for this study were collected from de-identified reports from two private forensic clinical psychologists' offices. The Court-mandated psychological evaluations included face-to-face interviews with parents and children, results from administered psychological measures, record reviews, collateral contacts, and reports of parent-child behavioral home observations completed by the respective Court-appointed psychologist

conducting the evaluation. De-identified data relevant to the present study were organized and transferred to a database for further investigation. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Nova Southeastern University as well as each Court-appointed psychologist approved data collection and methods.

## **Measures**

### **Measures of background information**

In order to collect pertinent background information from de-identified reports produced by the Court-appointed forensic psychologists, a demographic questionnaire was created and utilized to gather data including the following domains: basic demographic information about each family (e.g., gender, age, and race/ethnicity), details regarding the litigation process at the time of the evaluation, marital, education level, history of abuse, neglect, or domestic violence.

### **Identification of parental interference**

In order to identify the presence or absence of parental interfering behaviors, study data were only coded as present when conclusive information pertaining to the question of parental interference was explicitly included in the Court-appointed psychologist's report. For the purpose of this pilot study, families were classified into dichotomous groups in order to identify the presence or absence of parental interference in each family. The total amount of families that fell within the parental interference group was 27.3%.

### **Measures of child functioning: Self-report, parent report, and teacher report**

*Behavior Assessment System for Children-Parent Rating Scales, Teacher Rating Scales, and Self-Report of Personality* (BASC-2-PRS, BASC-2-TRS, BASC-2-SRP;

Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) were designed to measure maladaptive and adaptive behaviors in children. The TRS and PRS rating scales are utilized to acquire descriptive information about the child's behaviors within both the home and school environments. The TRS and PRS consist of three versions: (a) preschool, (b) child, and (c) adolescent based on the ages of the child of interest. Additionally, the Self Report of Personality is an assessment that the child completes pertaining to his or her own emotions, behaviors, and perceptions.

The BASC-2 PRS and TRS contain five indices (with a total of 16 clinical/adaptive subscales and 7 content scales): Externalizing Problems, Internalizing Problems, Behavioral Symptoms Index, Adaptive Skills, and School Problems. The BASC-2's test-retest reliability ranges from .81 to .92 (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). T-scores at or above 70 on the BASC-2 are considered clinically significant for the behavior scales. T-scores at or above 60, but below 70 are classified as at-risk for the behavior scales. For the adaptive scales, T-scores at or below 30 are considered clinically significant.

The BASC-2-SRP includes five composite indices (with a total of 18 clinical/adaptive subscales). For the purposes of this study, scales from the BASC-2 that are highlighted in the literature as areas in which children and adolescents demonstrate poorer psychological outcomes in families undergoing high conflict divorce were included in analyses including: internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, quality of social relationships, and academic achievement (Cherlin et al., 1991; Amato 2001; Malone et al., 2004; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Thus, scales from the BASC-2 that examine these areas of psychological functioning and impairment were included in



analyses. These scales included Aggression, Conduct Problems, Anxiety, Depression, Withdrawal, Social Skills, Externalizing Problems, Internalizing Problems, and Behavior Symptoms Index from the Parent and Teacher BASC-2 reports. Additionally, BASC-2 Self-Report Scales included in analyses were as follows: Social Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Interpersonal Relations, Self-Esteem, and Personal Adjustment.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyses were performed on archival data from the offices of two local private licensed psychologists, who routinely conducted forensic evaluations with families undergoing high conflict divorces ( $N = 55$ ). For the purposes of this study, the presence of parental interference was coded dichotomously (0 = no, 1 = yes) before analyses were conducted. Descriptive statistics on outcome variables for each group were examined, including measures of central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation, range).

The primary purpose of this study was to statistically examine child and adolescent adjustment and mental health outcomes involved in high conflict litigation. Specifically, this study aimed to compare the adjustment and mental health outcomes of children and adolescents whose parents engaged in parental interference to those individuals whose parents did not engage in parental interference. In order to identify these outcomes, BASC-2 profiles were examined to determine if a relationship existed between the presence of clinically elevated BASC-2 outcome scores and parental interference. In order to compare the mean scores of the BASC-2 scales among the various parental classification groups and the normative sample, several one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Specifically, each separate ANOVA

examined outcomes on parent, teacher, and self-reports of the BASC-2 between groups. Outcome variables included clinically elevated scales on the BASC-2 according to teacher, parent, and self-report. All data analysis procedures were carried out using SPSSx22.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

#### Parental interference vs. no-parental interference findings

##### Presence of parental interference

In the present sample, 27.3% (N =15) of the fifty-five families were identified by the clinical psychologists as engaging in parental interference. Thirteen of these cases were identified as the mother engaging in parental interference and in two cases the father engaged in interference.

##### Preliminary Analyses

Measures of central tendency and variability (*Mean (M)*, *Standard Deviation (SD)*, *Range*) are provided in Tables 6 and 7 with respect to all predictor variables for each group (parental interference vs. no parental interference). No significant differences were found between interfering and no interfering groups based on mother or father report on the BASC-2.

As shown in Table 8, teacher's reports on the BASC-2 were also consistent with parent reports in that no significant differences were found between groups. Moreover, Tables 9, 10, and 11 differentiate the percentages and frequencies of within normal limits, at-risk, and clinical child outcomes according to mother, father, and teacher report respectively.

**Table 6.** Mother's BASC-2 report comparison between groups.

	Interfering			No-interfering						
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Aggression	15	52.8	12.4	40	53.1	9.5	.03	.09	53	.93
Conduct Problems	14	51.1	11.4	29	52.3	11.7	.11	.33	41	.75
Anxiety	15	60	9.1	40	52.5	12.1	-.66	-2.2	53	.03
Depression	15	55.4	8.4	40	51	10.5	-.46	-1.5	53	.14
Withdrawal	15	54.2	15.2	40	50.3	12.4	.29	-.97	53	.33
Social Skills	15	52.1	8.3	40	55.4	10.2	.34	1.1	53	.27
Externalizing Problems	15	54.1	11	40	53.3	9.8	-.08	-.27	53	.79
Internalizing Problems	15	57.2	8.1	40	52	14.5	-.41	-1.34	53	.18
Behavioral Symptoms Index	15	54.4	10.2	40	53	13.4	-.11	-.38	53	.71

**Table 7.** Father BASC-2 report comparison between groups.

	Interfering			No-interfering						
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Aggression	15	49	11.4	37	48.4	10.6	-.05	-.17	50	.87
Conduct Problems	14	51.2	13.5	27	50.7	11	-.04	-.13	39	.90
Anxiety	15	52.6	15.8	37	52.3	8.2	-.03	-.10	50	.92
Depression	15	54.8	15.8	37	50.5	9.3	-.37	-1.2	50	.23
Withdrawal	15	48.9	15.6	37	49.1	8.5	.02	.07	50	.94
Social Skills	15	52	14.9	37	51.3	10.6	-.06	-.2	50	.84
Externalizing Problems	15	52.1	14.1	37	48.9	10.4	-.28	-.92	50	.36
Internalizing Problems	15	53.5	16.7	37	50.3	12.4	-.23	-.77	50	.44
Behavioral Symptoms Index	15	52.9	14.8	37	51.2	13.5	-.12	-.41	50	.69

**Table 8.** Teacher BASC-2 report comparison between groups.

	Interfering			No-interfering						
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Aggression	6	45.2	4.4	20	49.7	8.03	.60	1.30	24	.21
Anxiety	6	60.7	16	20	52.4	9.8	-.73	-1.56	24	.13
Depression	6	50	10.6	20	52	10.1	.19	.40	24	.69
Withdrawal	6	49.3	10.7	20	49.5	10.7	.01	.03	24	.98
Externalizing Problems	6	44.2	5.4	20	50	8.12	.76	1.64	24	.11
Internalizing Problems	6	56.8	19.5	20	53.2	8.6	-.31	-.67	24	.51
Behavioral Symptoms Index	6	47	8.4	20	50.8	8.9	.43	.92	24	.37

**Table 9.** Mother BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category (frequency/percentage).

	Interfering			No-interfering		
	Clinical <i>n (%)</i>	At-Risk <i>n (%)</i>	Within Normal Limits <i>n (%)</i>	Clinical <i>n (%)</i>	At-Risk <i>n (%)</i>	Within Normal Limits <i>n (%)</i>
Aggression	2 13.3%	2 13.3%	11 3.3%	4 9.3%	4 9.3%	32 74.4%
Conduct Problems	1 6.7%	3 20%	10 66.7%	3 7%	3 7%	23 53.5%
Anxiety	2 13.3%	6 40%	7 46.7%	6 14%	3 7%	31 72.1%
Depression	1 6.7%	6 40%	8 53.3%	1 2.3%	9 20.9%	30 69.8%
Withdrawal	3 20%	2 13.3%	10 66.7%	2 4.7%	7 16.3%	31 72.1%
Externalizing Problems	3 20%	1 6.7%	11 73.3%	2 4.7%	7 16.3%	31 72.1%
Internalizing Problems	2 13.3%	2 13.3%	11 73.3%	4 9.3%	6 14%	30 69.8%
Behavioral Symptoms Index	1 6.7%	4 26.7%	10 66.7%	4 9.3%	7 16.3%	29 67.4%

**Table 10.** Father BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category (frequency/percentage).

	Interfering			No-interfering		
	Clinical <i>n (%)</i>	At-Risk <i>n (%)</i>	Within Normal Limits <i>n (%)</i>	Clinical <i>n (%)</i>	At-Risk <i>n (%)</i>	Within Normal Limits <i>n (%)</i>
Aggression	1 6.7%	2 13.3%	12 80%	1 2.3%	7 16.3%	29 67.4%
Conduct Problems	2 13.3%	1 6.7%	11 73.3%	2 4.7%	4 9.3%	21 48.8%
Anxiety	2 13.3%	4 26.7%	9 60%	1 2.3%	5 11.6%	31 72.1%
Depression	1 6.7%	4 26.7%	10 66.7%	1 2.3%	7 16.3%	29 67.4%
Withdrawal	1 6.7%	2 13.3%	12 80%	0 0%	5 11.6%	32 74.4%
Externalizing Problems	1 6.7%	3 20%	11 73.3%	2 4.7%	3 7%	32 74.4%
Internalizing Problems	2 13.3%	2 13.3%	11 73.3%	1 2.3%	5 11.6%	31 72.1%
Behavioral Symptoms Index	1 6.7%	5 33.3%	9 60%	3 4.7%	5 11.6%	30 69.8%

**Table 11.** Teacher BASC-2 report of child outcomes, by clinical category (frequency/percentage).

	Interfering			No-interfering		
	Clinical <i>n</i> (%)	At-Risk <i>n</i> (%)	Within Normal Limits <i>n</i> (%)	Clinical <i>n</i> (%)	At-Risk <i>n</i> (%)	Within Normal Limits <i>n</i> (%)
Aggression	* *	* *	6 40%	1 2.5%	1 2.5%	18 45%
Anxiety	6 40%	1 6.7%	5 33.3%	2 5%	1 2.5%	17 42.5%
Depression	6 40%	1 6.7%	5 33.3%	1 2.5%	6 15%	13 32.5%
Withdrawal	* *	* *	6 40%	1 2.5%	4 10%	15 37.5%
Externalizing Problems	* *	* *	6 40%	1 2.5%	* *	19 47.5%
Internalizing Problems	6 40%	1 6.7%	5 33.3%	2 5%	3 7.5%	15 37.5%
Behavioral Symptoms Index	* *	1 6.7%	5 33.3%	1 2.5%	2 5%	17 42.5%

\*Missing data



Several exploratory ANOVAs were conducted to determine if significant differences existed regarding the ages or gender of the parents and children/adolescents. The results of these analyses revealed that no differences existed between the groups for mother's age [ $F(1, 56) = .85, p = .36$ ], father's age [ $F(1, 56) = .491, p = .49$ ], child's age [ $F(1, 56) = 1.3, p = .26$ ], or the child's gender [ $F(1, 56) = .77, p = .38$ ].

In order to compare the mean scores of the BASC-2 scales among the parental interference group and the normative sample, several one-way ANOVAs were employed. Of all the BASC-2 scales included in these ANOVAs (i.e., including all relevant parent, child, and teacher report scales), significant differences between the groups emerged for mother's report of the child's anxiety [ $F(1, 54) = 4.74, p = .03$ ].

The previous ANOVAs indicated that presence of parental interference was significantly correlated with mother's report of child anxiety on the BASC-2 ( $p = .034, p < .05$ ). Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = -.66$ ) suggested a moderate to high practical significance. Thus, parental interference, child gender, and the interaction of these two variables were entered into a stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting mother's report of child anxiety on the BASC-2. In step 1, parental interference was added to the model (0 = no parental interference, 1 = parental interference), in step 2, child gender was added (0 = male, 1 = female), and the interaction was added in the third step. The model with all three predictor variables included was significant [ $F(3, 51) = 3.22, p = .03$ ]. When examining which predictors accounted for the variance in mother's report of child anxiety on the BASC-2, child gender accounted for a significant proportion of the variance ( $t = 2.13, p = .04$ ). Parental interference was not a significant predictor in the full model ( $t = 1.80, p = .08$ ) nor was the interaction between gender and

parental interference a significant predictor ( $t = -0.77, p = .45$ ). The results of this regression analysis suggest that female children and adolescents have higher anxiety scores than male children, as rated by their mothers.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

The current study sought to examine the impact that parental interference has on the psychological adjustment of children and adolescents who are exposed to this phenomenon during high conflict divorce proceedings. It was hypothesized that children and adolescents exposed to parental interference would exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviors, internalizing issues, social impairment, and poorer academic functioning in comparison to youth who are not exposed to parental interference during high conflict divorce proceedings (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Lansford, 2009; Amato, 1993).

After comparison of BASC-2 outcomes between parental interference and no parental interference groups, neither parent nor teacher reports yielded significant differences. Specifically, across all three reporters (mother, father, and teacher), higher elevations on BASC-2 domains were not noted in the parental interference group as compared to children and adolescents in families that did not exhibit parental interference behaviors. Thus, hypotheses were not supported by the data in this study.

A lack of differences between groups may have several implications. First, there may not be significant differences between these two groups based on parent report because of parental reluctance to disclose impairment in children due to concern of it negatively impacting time sharing. However, the finding that teachers also did not report significant differences between groups may indicate that differences do not exist as teachers would not be concerned with time sharing outcomes and would be more likely to

honestly report their perspective on the child's emotional and behavioral functioning. Overall, this study highlights the need for future research to include quantitative data in order to better understand how parental interference impacts child adjustment as well as emotional and behavioral functioning.

As mother's report of child anxiety was found to be elevated in both groups (i.e., parental interference and no parental interference groups), outcomes were examined using ANOVAs and stepwise regression models in order to identify if the anxiety scale supported by the literature on the BASC-2 was more elevated in children and adolescents of parents that were reportedly engaging in parental interference than in families where no parental interference was reported. Additional analyses revealed that the child's gender was a significant predictor of anxiety as reported by mothers. It is important to note that although effect sizes were moderate to high, differences in group sizes (i.e., parental interference [ $n = 40$ ] and no parental interference [ $n = 15$ ]) could be accounting for that moderate effect.

Results from analyses suggested that in the overall sample, mothers were more likely to report elevated levels of anxiety in daughters in comparison to sons. This was found in both parental interference and no parental interference groups. The literature supports these results by confirming that parents and other reporters more often identify symptoms of internalizing behaviors in females (i.e., anxiety) over males. Specifically, the literature supports this finding in that females are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors than their male counterparts. Thus, it is possible that female children are both more likely to exhibit internalizing symptoms than their male counterparts as well as that parents and other reporters may be more likely to report more internalizing symptoms in

female children than in male children (McLean, Asnaanib, Litza, & Hofmann, 2011).

Although mother's report of anxiety was elevated across the sample of the present study, no significant differences between parental interference and no parental interference groups were found. While the divorce literature supports aforementioned hypotheses that children and adolescents of parents undergoing high conflict divorce proceedings are more likely to exhibit poorer psychological outcomes in internalizing, externalizing, quality of social relationships, and academic achievement, within this specific sample, findings did not support what the literature has highlighted to date. It is possible that the anticipated clinically significant elevations were not found due to several factors. Parents may be reluctant to honestly report that their children are exhibiting negative symptoms and behaviors during these evaluations in fear of it negatively impacting time sharing outcomes. Specifically, it is not surprising that parents that engage in parental interference did not report poorer adjustment or psychological mental health outcomes as compared to parents that do not engage in parental interference because they may fear that time sharing decisions may be altered in favor of the other parent if children are seen as having psychological issues or concerns at the time of the evaluation. Moreover, parents that engage in parental interference may not be willing or able to identify or admit to problematic behaviors and emotions in their children due to their own judgment errors, biases, and potential mental health issues.

The lack of significant findings between groups and within identified scales on the BASC-2 may be due to parents being reluctant to disclose negative information about their children during such high conflict divorce proceedings. Parents may be uncertain about how such findings would be interpreted by mental health professionals. Forensic

psychologists can address this issue by providing psycho-education to parents regarding how results will be utilized to determine outcomes in each specific case in order to encourage parent to report honestly and accurately about their child's level of psychological functioning. Although the BASC-2 does include validity scales that can control for underreporting to some degree, it would be beneficial for professionals to provide psycho-education to parents so that they are more likely to honestly report their child's symptoms and appropriate treatment planning and intervention can take place to address any psychological impairment in functioning.

### **Study strengths**

Overall, this study holds several strengths. First, as noted above, the study results helped to fill in the significant gaps in the existing divorce and couple dissolution literature. Although an extensive amount of research that examines the psychological outcomes of adults who experienced parental interference as children exists, few studies to date have examined the short-term impact of parental interference on children and adolescents of parents undergoing high conflict divorce proceedings. The current study fills in significant holes in the literature in this regard. As children (more specifically, children of parents who are involved in high conflict divorce) are a marginalized and vulnerable population, it is important to identify and examine all aspects of this vulnerability. With a greater understanding of the psychological adjustment of children and adolescents who are exposed to parental interference, future generations of youth going through this highly stressful experience may exhibit fewer symptoms and behaviors of psychological maladjustment. Furthermore, the fact that the study design utilized comparisons of self, parental, and teacher report using a valid instrument to

measure child psychological symptoms and behaviors will serve to minimize response bias, ultimately strengthening the validity of the results.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Limitations of this study should also be taken into consideration when interpreting findings. In order to generalize these results, future research should include data collection that more definitively examines anxiety as a construct outside of the generally limited scale of the BASC-2. Moreover, collateral information from either behavioral observation or additional caregivers and/or collateral reporters should be obtained in order to account for over or underreporting by parents in high conflict divorce proceedings.

The primary limitation of this study involves the manner in which parental interference was identified in each case. As only the Court-appointed psychologist that conducted the evaluation reported on whether or not parental interference was present based on behavioral observations and collateral contact information, the presence of parental interference could not be validated or verified by another rater. Moreover, inter-rater reliability was not possible due to the retrospective nature of these evaluations. However, it should be noted that the decision of a court-appointed psychologist to determine whether or not parental interference exists is based upon multiple sources of data including parent report, child report, collateral data (i.e., teachers, extended family members, and other individuals that know the child and family in various contexts and settings), and behavioral observations.

The construct validity of the current study is also called into question. Overall, due to the self-report nature of the current study's outcome variables (i.e., BASC-2-SRP

and BASC-2-PRS), there may have been under reporting of child psychopathology. Specifically, as parents completing measures regarding their child's psychological functioning were undergoing evaluations of their own by the Court-appointed psychologist, they may have been less likely to report higher levels of psychopathology in fear of how that report would affect custody decisions. However, this effect was likely minimized due to the use of valid and reliable measures. None of the BASC-2 reports included in this sample had invalid profiles as identified by the BASC-2 validity indices. Moreover, in families where children were exposed to parental interference, it is possible that these individuals were influenced to respond to BASC-2-SRP in a manner that was not consistent with significant levels of reported psychological adjustment.

Given the specific population this study investigated of high conflict families disputing custody, it consisted of a relatively large sample size. However, the small sample size of the participants of interest (i.e., children with a parent that engaged in parental interference) suggests that results should be interpreted with caution. Specifically, more significant effects could have been observed with a larger target sample population. In order to generalize findings, a large sample size would be ideal. Although, given the infrequent incidence of parental interference, it is possible that this sample size may be representative of the relatively low frequency of parental interference within high conflict divorce proceedings overall.

Additionally, as this sample included predominantly Caucasian families in the Southeastern region of the United States, current findings may not generalize to other ethnic groups. However, this particular sample did include a relatively high number of



Hispanic individuals which is a strength of the study. Future studies should examine differences between these groups among more diverse race/ethnicity groups.

Furthermore, this study utilized retrospective information gathered from two Court appointed psychologists' files. As the Court-appointed psychologists did not intend to collect data for the present study at the time these evaluations were conducted, the data that were available regarding specific parental interference behaviors was limited and may have contributed to lower prevalence rates or false positive identification of parental interfering behaviors. Consequently, it would be ideal for future studies investigating parental interference in children and adolescents to be prospective.

While still highly debated in the divorce literature, parental interference has yet to be clearly defined. Future directions of research regarding parental interference should include a more distinct consensus regarding the definition of the role of both parents and children in this phenomenon. Moreover, future studies should seek empirical support to clarify the prevalence of the short-term impact that parental interference has on children and adolescents that experience this phenomenon. Specifically, utilizing a multi-informant approach to gather quantitative data regarding the academic, behavioral, and emotional functioning of children and adolescents in prospective studies would be ideal in identifying how parental interference affects youth.

Furthermore, studies that allow for inter-rater agreement between Court-appointed psychologists would serve to corroborate the characteristics observed in cases that parental interference is suspected by forensic psychologists. In addition to the need for professionals to consistently identify parental interference reliably, the need for an instrument that can aide in the accurate detection of this phenomenon is well overdue.

Moreover, future research should examine the influence that various demographics (e.g., socio-economic status, race/ethnicity) may have on the levels of impairment in child psychopathology.

### **Clinical implications for forensic psychologists**

Regarding clinical implications for professionals within the forensic field, future research should examine the importance of training forensic psychologists who work with children and adolescents within high conflict divorce proceedings to appropriately and effectively intervene on behalf of this population. As research has indicated that this is a particularly vulnerable population (Kelly and Johnston, 2001; Fidler & Bala, 2010), the identification of optimal treatment interventions for children who experience parental interference is of particular importance. Findings should be extended to examine the role that parenting behaviors play in the treatment outcomes of children and adolescents (especially those who exhibit parental interference). Results from this research may serve to more accurately and consistently inform the identification and treatment of children and adolescents who are at-risk for the development or exacerbation of psychopathology due to parental interference.

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