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Children Resisting Contact With a Parent Postseparation: Assessing This Phenomenon Using an Ecological Systems Framework

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The process of separation and divorce demands significant changes among family relationships requiring the ongoing negotiation of roles and responsibilities. Most children of separated parents will continue to want contact with both parents, but a small subgroup of children will align with one parent and simultaneously resist or reject the other. Several names and etiological suggestions have been coined to label these extreme alignments, but many of these oversimplify the complexity of these strained parent–child relationship dynamics. This article critically reviews the research literature using an ecological systems framework to better understand the nature of these complex strained parent–child relationships. Courts, legal, and mental health professionals that work with these families are encouraged to assess and respond to these dynamics using an ecological approach.

KEYWORDS divorce, parent–child contact problems, parent–child relations, separation

The transition of separation and divorce demands significant changes among families as they adjust to new living arrangements, family structures, and parenting plans. Parents must process the ending of the couple relationship while moving toward coparenting structures that realign parenting roles and responsibilities, and new family dynamics, which emerge from the two-household reality. The entire family typically processes a myriad of

emotions associated with the physical, emotional, and psychological tasks of renegotiating family relationships (Emery, 2012).

Research indicates that 75% to 80% of families successfully transition from a nuclear family to a binuclear family over a course of 2 to 3 years postseparation as the former couple emotionally disengages from each other (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). These families are able to maintain functional interparental coparenting, communication patterns, appropriate boundaries, and healthy parent–child relationships. Longitudinal data suggest that approximately 10% to 15% of separated families remain in "high conflict" that continues 2 to 3 years postseparation (Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). This conflict is characterized by high levels of anger, hostility and distrust, discordant coparenting, incidents of verbal or physical aggression, protracted litigation, and strained parent–child relationships that continue 2 to 3 years postseparation (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010).

Although no specific rates have been established, research reveals that most children of separated parents continue to want contact with both parents (Johnston, 2005). A small subgroup of children, however, will resist or refuse having contact with a parent postseparation while remaining aligned with the other parent (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013). Prevalence rates of children who resist or refuse contact remain unclear, but appear to vary depending on the operational definition and sampling strategy used (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012). For instance, Johnston's (1993, 2003) studies revealed that 15% of children from community samples and 21% to 27% of children from custody disputing families were "rejecting" of one parent while remaining aligned with the other. In contrast, Lampel's (1996) study of custody disputing families used a much broader definition of alignment that examined children's messages, both positive and negative, about their parents. Using this definition, 40% of children showed an alignment toward one parent.

Research findings indicate that children tend to resist or reject the non-custodial parent more often, with both mothers and fathers equally likely of being the rejected parent; among high-conflict litigating families, fathers are frequently the noncustodial parents (Bala, 2010). In the research literature, the custodial parent is also referred to as the "favored," "preferred," "aligned," or "alienating" parent, with these terms often used interchangeably. The noncustodial parent is referred to as the "targeted," "rejected," "nonpreferred," or "alienated" parent.

Research has also found that children resist or refuse parental contact in intact, separated, divorced, and litigating families (Moné & Biringen, 2006). However, it is encountered with greater frequency among separated and custody litigating families (Johnston, 2003; Moné & Biringen, 2006). This suggests that some combination of the interparental conflict, parenting dynamics postseparation, and a child's personality disposition or personal vulnerability is a predictive factor in children who resist or refuse parental contact.

The phenomenon of a child who resists or refuses contact with a parent postseparation dates back to research literature from 1980 that describes this pattern of behavior (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Names such as *parental alienation syndrome* (Gardner, 1985), *parental alienation* (Darnall, 2010), *child alienation* (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), and *unjustified rejection* (Fidler et al., 2013) have been coined as an attempt to label these extreme alignments. Unfortunately, these labels have brought forth much controversy and polarized positions among researchers, legal and mental health professionals, and, most certainly, the families affected.

In the past decade, family courts have seen a significant increase in the number of parent–child contact problems and allegations of alienation and unjustified rejection of a parent (Bala, Hunt, & McCarney, 2010). This is compounded by recent empirical evidence that indicates strained parent–child relationships among high-conflict separations are contraindicated to children's best interests and overall functioning postseparation (Amato, 2001; Fabricius, Braver, Diaz, & Velez, 2010). Extensive national and international studies have revealed children of divorce show better outcomes on measures of emotional, behavioral, psychological, physical, and academic well-being when they maintain close emotional bonds, frequent contact, and quality relationships with both parents (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Booth, Scott, & King, 2010; Fabricius et al., 2010; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012; Kaspiew et al., 2009; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Lamb, 2000; King & Sobolewski, 2006; Lamb, 2002, 2012; Melli & Brown, 2008; Nielsen, 2013a, 2013b; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Diamond, 2012). Having a close relationship with both parents has been hypothesized to help mitigate the negative impact of parental conflict (Nielsen, 2013a, 2013b). This has contributed to greater awareness among policy and decision makers as well as custody law reforms, which support and encourage healthy parent–child involvement and relationships postseparation (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Kelly, 2012; Lamb, 2012; Nielsen, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Warshak, 2014).

This article critically reviews the literature using an ecological systems-based approach to gain a better understanding of the intricacies of strained parent–child relationships and parent–child contact problems in the context of separation and divorce.

DIFFERENTIATION OF STRAINED PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

At this time, there is no single definition for parental alienation or children who resist or refuse parental contact. Rather, with recent developments in research and clinical experience, new constructs have been proposed to provide descriptive approaches to differentiate types of parent–child contact problems encountered among separated and divorced families. The research
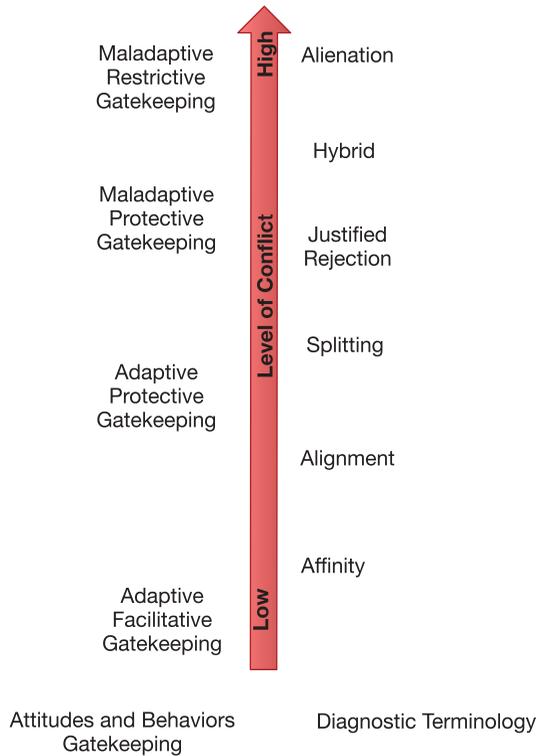
FIGURE 1 Adapted continuum of strained parent–child relationships.

depicts strained parent–child relationships as falling on a continuum, from positive and healthy to negative and pathological. Based on a review of the research literature, an adapted visual illustration of Kelly and Johnston's (2001) initial continuum of parent–child relationships blended with Austin, Pruett, Kirkpatrick, Flens, and Gould's (2013) gatekeeping continuum has been developed (Figure 1). This model takes into account the different types and ways of explaining strained parent–child relationships according to the latest research literature, including the level of conflict as a factor. A brief review of each typology is described.

At the healthiest end of the continuum, and in the majority of cases, children have positive relationships with both parents, value them, and wish to spend a significant amount, or equal amounts of time with them postseparation (Johnston et al., 2009).

Affinity

Also at the healthy end of the continuum, a child will maintain healthy contact with both parents but might display an affinity toward one parent. In these cases, the child continues to want contact with both parents, but

for a variety of developmentally appropriate reasons (e.g., temperament, gender, age, familiarity, comfort, specific interests, preference of parenting practices) might gravitate to or have a preference for one parent (Johnston et al., 2009; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Affinity toward a parent is flexible and might shift to the other parent based on context, situation, or child development considerations (Fidler et al., 2013).

Alliance/Alignment

Further along the continuum are children who develop an alignment with one parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Allied children are characterized by displaying a consistent preference for one parent during the marriage or separation; after separation, allied children report wanting limited contact with the nonpreferred parent (Johnston et al., 2009; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Allied children do not completely reject the nonpreferred parent and do not wish to permanently terminate contact. Rather, what characterizes this subgroup of children is their ambivalence toward the nonpreferred parent, where they might express feelings of sadness, anger, hurt, love, and resistance to contact (Fidler et al., 2013; Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

High-Conflict Splitting

High conflict has also been used as a way of explaining strained parent–child relationships and parent–child contact problems postseparation. Research shows that children in high-conflict families are frequently triangulated into the conflict, placed in the middle of parental disputes and subsequently, potentially pressured to pick a side (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Emery, 2012; Grych, 2005). Children in high-conflict situations are faced with the overwhelming demand of having to adapt between their warring caregivers, needing to change their emotional presentation and responses depending on their caregiving environment (Garber, 2014). It is believed that children in high-conflict situations might split their parental relationships so that each relationship is separate and private from the other parent. In these cases, both parents might assume that the child is aligned with the other parent because the child provides no insight about their relationship status with the other parent and presents as guarded. This splitting is best described as a coping mechanism and a way for the child to remove themselves from the contentious conflict (Buchanan et al., 1991; Grych, 2005; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Johnston et al., 2009).

Realistic Estrangement/Justified Rejection

Some children will resist having contact with a parent as a result of having experienced or witnessed that parent's abuse, neglect, family violence, or

extreme parenting deficiencies (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). The child might have been a direct victim of abuse or might have observed repeated violence or emotional outbursts during the marriage or after separation. The child need not have directly witnessed the abuse, but merely seen the aftermath of the violence to feel trauma and refuse contact (Walker & Shapiro, 2010). The research literature labels this subset of children as exhibiting "realistic estrangement" or "justified rejection"; it is considered a justified, adaptive, and protective response exhibited by the child (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Drozd & Olesen, 2004, 2010; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Fidler et al., 2013; Garber, 2007; Gardner, 2001; Kelly & Johnston, 2001)

Alienation

At the most negative and pathological end of the continuum are alienated children. Alienated children completely refuse contact with the rejected parent. Alienated children express outward rejection toward the nonpreferred parent with no feelings of ambivalence or guilt. It is combined with overt or covert parental alienating behaviors (PABs), either intentional or unintentional by the favored parent (Fidler et al., 2013; Johnston & Kelly, 2004). In contrast to children who justifiably reject a parent, these rejected parents are considered "good enough," sometimes exemplary, with no verified or substantiated history of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse toward the child (Johnston & Kelly, 2004). A distinguishing feature of this group of children is that prior to the separation, the child had an "excellent," "good," or "good enough" relationship with the rejected parent (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Any inherent parenting or personality flaw in the rejected parent can be a contributing factor to a child's rejection, but would have been insufficient to cause in itself a relationship breakdown. In sum, alienation involves a child's rejection of a parent, where previously the child had a "good enough" relationship with that parent. The rejection is disproportionate to the child's actual experience and is combined with the favored parent's intentional or unintentional alienating behaviors and strategies.

Hybrid Cases

As research and clinical experience continue to develop, mental health and legal professionals report few pure cases of alienation and justified rejection are encountered among disputed cases (Friedlander & Walters, 2010, 2014). It is more common to find "mixed" cases that involve a combination of PABs, enmeshment between the favored parent and the child, and compromised parenting by the rejected parent that lends itself to some proportional resistance by the child (Friedlander & Walters, 2010). These cases are labeled hybrid cases in the literature, as it involves contributing factors from both the

favored and rejected parent (Friedlander & Walters, 2010). In the Friedlander and Walters (2010) clinical sample, hybrid cases accounted for 85% of their caseload.

Gatekeeping

The literature has also recently shifted its focus to one that examines and describes parental attitudes, behaviors, and actions, which have the potential to impact the quality of the other parent's relationship and involvement with the child. This is referred to as *gatekeeping* (Austin Fieldstone & Pruett, 2013; Austin, Pruett, et al., 2013). On its own, gatekeeping is a nondirectional concept. *Gate opening* refers to attitudes and behaviors that facilitate and encourage involvement; *gate closing* refers to actions that inhibit involvement (Ganong, Coleman, & McCaulley, 2012; Trinder, 2008).

Gatekeeping behaviors can be either adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive behaviors serve the purpose of doing what is best for the child; they promote the parent–child relationship so long as it is safe, and protect the child if he or she is in need of protection from the other parent. Maladaptive gatekeeping, on the other hand, does not consider the child's best interests. This gatekeeping behavior is based on the parent's own needs, might be a form of revenge against the other parent, or include nonprotective, potentially dangerous behavior (e.g., overly lax; Drozd, Olesen, & Saini, 2014).

Protective gatekeeping, also known as *justified gatekeeping,* refers to a situation in which a parent uses gate closing or inhibitory behaviors in an attempt to protect the child from risk of "harm, emotional distress, behavioral problems, adjustment difficulties, or negative developmental impact" from spending time with the parent (Drozd, Khuenle, & Olesen, 2011; Drozd et al., 2014). This might be adaptive, reasonable, protective, or justified in cases where there is reasonable cause to fear or hold negative beliefs about a parent (e.g., incidents of abuse or neglect). It might be unjustified and maladaptive when the bases of the concerns remain unsubstantiated (Drozd et al., 2011).

Restrictive gatekeeping parents display attitudes and behaviors that inhibit and interfere with the other parent's involvement and the parent–child relationship (Drozd et al., 2011; Ganong et al., 2012). These parents are not supportive of the other parent and do not value the contributions of the other parent. In extreme cases, the restrictive gatekeeper sees little or no value in the relationship offered by the other parent and might potentially hinder access (Drozd et al., 2014).

Gatekeeping behaviors provide a reframed approach to viewing strained parent–child relationships by shifting the focus from one that could be blaming to one that is more descriptive of parental attitudes and behaviors. This is concordant with researchers' and clinicians' belief that descriptive behaviors along with relevant history are of greater relevance

to both courts and mental health professionals to determine appropriate responses (Johnston et al., 2009).

ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Several psychological theories have been identified in the literature to help explicate the etiology and differentiate reasons for strained parent–child relationships and subsequent parent–child contact problems. Each theory might hold some empirical or clinically based support, but no single theory can fully explain the complexity and dynamics these families present. Rather, theories are intricate, interconnected, and frequently comorbid, suggesting a transactional ecological systems approach is best suited to understand the interplay of the multiple multilevel factors implicated in strained parent–child relationships. As such, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) transactional ecological systems theory is a helpful framework that can be applied to better understand the dynamic interplay of multiple factors implicated in strained parent–child relationships.

Fundamental to ecological systems theory, analysis of systems occurs at the interaction and interdependence levels between people and their environment, known as the *person-in-environment perspective.* The theory posits that individuals engage in transactions with other humans and with other systems in the environment, each having an independent effect and a reciprocal influence on each other (Greene, 2008). Using this theoretical model, the assessment of human problems takes into consideration the individual (ontogenic development, microsystem), their environmental systems (mesosystem, macrosystem), and their reciprocal influence on each another.

APPLYING ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK TO PARENT–CHILD CONTACT PROBLEMS

Empirical support exists for multilevel risk factors that can potentially contribute to the development of strained parent–child relationships and subsequent contact problems. Multilevel risk factors specific to the rejected parent, the favored parent, the interparental relationship, the child, and the parent–child relationship are reviewed. The corrosive impact of the larger macrosystem is also highlighted, given that the nature of the system itself serves to escalate existing negative dynamics.

Ontogenic Risk Factors

PARENTING STYLE

Parenting styles have been associated with different developmental outcomes and psychopathology in children (Baumrind, 1971). Compromised

parenting appears to be a major contributing risk factor associated with the development of strained parent–child relationships in both intact and separated families (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995; Garber, 2011). Baumrind (1971) identified four styles of parenting varying in levels of warmth and control: authoritative, indulgent/permissive, neglectful/uninvolved, and authoritarian. Warmth is characterized by support, nurturing, and reassurance toward the child while being emotionally sensitive and attuned to the child's needs. Control is positively defined as encompassing discipline behavior, setting age-appropriate limits and consistently applying them, and monitoring activities and whereabouts. Parents high on both warmth and control are authoritative, those low on both are neglectful/uninvolved, those high in warmth and low on control are indulgent/permissive, and those low on warmth and high in control are authoritarian (Baumrind, 1968, 1971).

Developmental psychologists endorse authoritative parenting as the optimal parenting style (Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, & Cauffman, 2006). Several psychological studies and meta-analyses support the finding that children and adolescents raised in authoritative environments with emotional warmth show the best psychosocial outcome, characterized by more secure parent–child attachments, better peer relations, and less risky behaviors than their counterparts (Baumrind, 1971; Berg-Nielsen, Vikan, & Dahl, 2002; Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Cusinato, 1998; Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003; Steinberg, 2001; Steinberg et al., 2006; Zahn-Waxler, Duggal, & Gruber, 2002).

When examining dynamics among families with strained parent–child relationships and contact problems, Johnston's (2005) study revealed that rejected fathers tended to lack warmth, empathy, and cognitive understanding of the children's viewpoints. These fathers were found to be less able to communicate with the children, less involved in the children's daily activities, and experienced less pleasure, joy, or fun when relating to the children. Rejected mothers were found to lack parenting skills and became compromised by the children's rejection. Mothers were also found to be less involved and deficient in warmth, empathy, and ability to communicate. Both rejected mothers and fathers showed diminished social, emotional, and psychological adjustment postdivorce (Johnston, 2005).

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Parent psychopathology is a significant family stressor that has an impact on parenting and the parent–child relationship (Berg-Nielsen et al., 2002; Loukas, Twitchell, Piejak, Fitzgerald, & Zucker, 1998; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2002). Research on parenting skills among adult psychiatric patients is scarce, despite the high risk of psychosocial problems for children of psychiatric patients (Berg-Nielsen et al., 2002). The majority of the research literature examines the impact of a mother's psychopathology on parental behavior

with limited information of psychopathology on father's parenting (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2002). The limitation of the research on factors related to father's parenting is a significant hindrance to furthering our knowledge in the area.

For instance, research has shown that depression can impact parenting practices and parents' ability to guide and nurture their children (Westbrook & Harden, 2010) In Berg-Nielsen et al.'s (2002) review of the literature, studies revealed that mothers with depression displayed a more negative mood, were more critical, were more rejecting, and displayed negative affect toward their children. Research further linked depression in parents of young children with less child-centered behaviors (Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999). That is, mothers suffering from depression showed less attunement to their children's needs; less warmth; impaired disciplinary functioning; more harsh, hostile, and coercive parenting styles; and inconsistency in their parenting practices (Jackson & Scheines, 2005). Depression and negative mood could also lead to the inappropriate use of their children as a source of emotional support (Loukas et al., 1998).

When applying the concept of parent psychopathology and its correlation to parent–child relationships, Pruett, Williams, Insabella, and Little (2003) found in their sample of families involved in the court system that parent symptomatology is predictive of negative changes in the parent–child relationship. For both mothers and fathers, parental symptomatology indirectly influenced child behavioral outcomes through the negative changes in the parent–child relationship. This is consistent with previous research that shows parental distress and vulnerability could lead to diminished parenting capabilities, which in turn are associated with poorer child outcomes and poorer parent–child relationships (Pett, Wampold, Turner, & Vaughan-Cole; 1999; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990; Whiteside & Becker, 2000).

PERSONALITY DISORDERS

A dearth of research exists on parenting capabilities of parents with personality disorders (Berg-Nielsen et al., 2002). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed. [*DSM–5*]; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines personality disorders as inflexible and maladaptive personality traits, which cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress. Although limited empirical research exists, the clinical impression is that personality disorders seriously interfere with adequate parenting, thus impairing the parent–child relationship (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2002). Evidence of this dates back to a Rutter and Quinton (1984) study of children of psychiatric outpatients. The authors found that children had a higher risk of psychopathology if a parent had a personality disorder characterized by hostility.

More recent research by Hobson and colleagues (2009) investigated parenting behaviors of mothers with borderline personality disorder (BPD). Results revealed mothers with BPD displayed deregulated affective communication toward their infants, including critical and intrusive behaviors, role confusion, and frightening behaviors. A separate review of mothers with BPD found that maternal parenting strategies are characterized by oscillations between intrusive overinvolvement and withdrawn underinvolvement (Stepp, Whalen, Pilkonis, Hipwell, & Levine, 2012).

Within the research literature on parent–child contact problems, five studies contained psychological profiles of the parents and child, which were obtained during a custody evaluation (Saini et al., 2012). Results revealed that that in three of four studies, favored parents used more narcissistic, primitive defenses and showed poor reality testing. Findings with respect to the rejected parent were mixed. One study found characterological differences between the rejected parent and the favored parent, whereas another study did not. One study found no characterological differences between a rejected parent in contact cases when compared to parents with no contact problems.

In sum, parents who exhibit personality disorders are believed to show inconsistent discipline and compromised parenting characterized by recurrent and unpredictable behavior. It is posited that both compromised parenting and a child's inability to predict a parent's reactions due to inconsistent parenting impacts their level of security, parent–child attachment relationship, and development. This in turn could lead to a strained parent–child relationship and subsequent contact problems.

Substance use

The deleterious effects of parental substance abuse on children have been well documented (Mayes & Truman, 2002; Richter & Richter, 2001). Evidence of this dates back to Baumrind's (1991) research on parenting styles where substance-using parents exhibit authoritarian or overly permissive behaviors. Although research findings have been inconsistent, parental substance abuse often compromises parenting practices, negatively affects the parent–child relationship (Ryan, Marsh, Testa, & Louderman, 2006), and significantly increases the risk of child maltreatment (Ryan et al., 2006; Walsh, MacMillan, & Jamieson, 2003; Widom & Hiller-Sturmhofel, 2001).

The specific pathway by which substance abuse affects quality of parenting is still unknown (Walsh et al., 2003). However, it is believed that the multiple risk factors associated with substance use such as chaotic lifestyles, negative or abusive interactions with partners, and marital dissatisfaction likely influence parenting and impair parent–child interactions (Berg-Nielsen et al., 2002; Loukas et al., 1998; Walsh et al., 2003). Negative and unpredictable behaviors manifested by the parent as a result of being under the

influence of a substance can help explain the development of parent–child relationship issues.

CHILD'S APPRAISAL AND TEMPERAMENT

Appraisals are children's subjective perceptions of parental disagreements and their understanding of the causes and consequences of the conflict (Fosco & Grych, 2008). Cross-sectional and longitudinal research supports the role of children's appraisals of threat and self-blame as mechanisms that mediate the relationship between conflict and child adjustment (Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004). The cognitive-contextual model proposed by Grych and Fincham (1990) emphasizes the role of children's perceptions of threat posed by conflict; a child's belief in their ability to cope and personal attributions regarding the cause of the conflict are important for shaping a child's emotional and behavioral responses. Children who perceive conflict to be dangerous to them, their parents, or their family will likely be more distressed than children who view a conflict as benign (Grych et al., 2000). Children with difficulty appraising a situation could present with distorted understanding of the family conflict. This cognitive distortion might result in children exhibiting resistance and refusal behaviors.

COGNITIVE CAPACITY

The current status of the research further suggests that a certain level of cognitive sophistication and maturity is needed to understand multiple, differing, and simultaneous perspectives each family member might have with respect to the conflict. If cognitive maturity is not reached, the child can present with shifting allegiances between parents (Garber, 2014; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Once cognitive development is attained and the child can hold contradictory ideas at the same time, the child might choose to align with one parent to cope and avoid having to reconcile the two disparate perspectives (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). The literature has found that it is unusual to see children who present with strong rigid views and display contact problems prior to age 7 or 8. The most common age range found among children resisting contact is from 9 to 15 years of age, once sufficient cognitive maturity has been reached (Johnston et al., 2009).

PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP HISTORY

In addition, one cannot discount a child's previous relationship with a parent prior to the physical separation. In some cases, a child might wish to spend time only with one parent and resist the other, not because of an

alignment, but because the child has a closer relationship with the favored parent, which was established preseparation. In these cases, it is important for one to assess the level of involvement each parent had with the child prior to the separation before believing the child is being influenced or is aligned.

Microsystem Risk Factors

ALIENATING BEHAVIORS

Among the clinical cases encountered and found among case law, a parent's engagement in alienating behaviors is a common risk factor and contributory element to parent–child contact problems.

Fidler et al. (2013) reported that rejected parents who speak negatively of the other parent, undermine the other parent, or make the child feel guilty about their relationship with the other parent might struggle with the backfiring of their own behaviors resulting in the child rejecting contact. In this case, the child cannot tolerate the denigration of the other, more favored, parent and is unable to assert their feelings about that parent's behavior; instead the child rejects future contact to avoid being placed in the uncomfortable position.

A favored parent might engage in alienating behaviors directly, subtly, or unconsciously operating from their own personal history or psychopathology (Drozd & Olesen, 2004). Johnston's (2005) empirical analysis of alienated children revealed that although rejected parents' own deficits were influential in the creation of their own alienation, favored parents contributed to alienating a child's affection from the other parent via alienating behaviors and the sabotage of the parent–child relationship.

COUNTER-REJECTING BEHAVIORS

Rejected parents who are frustrated, angry, and hurt by their children's behaviors toward them might react negatively toward their children as a response to how they are being treated. Clinical practitioners call this reaction *counter-rejecting behavior* (Baker & Andre, 2008; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Warshak, 2010). Counter-rejecting parents might react with passivity, withdrawal, or anger in an effort to cope with the conflict or change the child's behavior. Out of their frustration, they can lack empathy and react punitively or vindictively to the way they are being treated (Fidler & Bala, 2010). Some rejected parents might be offended and react with aggression and disrespectful behavior or vacillate between passivity and confrontational behavior, further confusing the child (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Warshak, 2010). Unfortunately, this has the potential of further contributing to the dynamics and affirming a child's distorted beliefs.

ENMESHED BOUNDARIES

Favored parents have been shown to demonstrate poor emotional and psychological boundaries with their children. They might use their children as confidantes by sharing information that is inappropriate for the child's age and use the child for their own emotional support (Garber, 2011; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005b). Examples include parents divulging intimate details of what occurred during the marriage or throughout the separation, or showing court materials including affidavits, exhibits of evidence, or court orders. In situations where the child feels a sense of loyalty or perceives the favored parent as the weaker parent, knowledge of adult details or court information further reinforces the need to ally with the favored parent. Nonetheless, although the favored parent might state that they have not fostered or promoted the alignment, the parent is comforted and satisfied with the alignment and makes no effort to discourage the behaviors (Ellis & Boyan, 2010).

In Johnston et al.'s (2005b) regression analysis of factors related to child alienation, the authors found that alienating parents had "poor boundaries, engaged in role reversal with their children and had difficulty distinguishing their own feelings from those of their child" (p. 207).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Empirical research on postseparation parenting and parent–child relationships when a history of domestic violence is present is still in its infancy (Hardesty, Haselschwerdt, & Johnson, 2012). For family court matters, reliable differentiation of the type of domestic violence encountered in a family is expected to provide the court with direction in determining whether parent–child contact is appropriate, potential safeguards that might be necessary, and the type of parenting plan that will most likely promote healthy outcomes for children and the parent–child relationship (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008).

Studies have found that children exposed to domestic violence experience negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors including depression, anxiety, worry, and greater tendency to physical aggression and behavior problems (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Rossman, 1998). Exposure to domestic violence could lead to symptoms of trauma in the form of intrusiveness, reexperiencing of events, a chronic state of hyperarousal, and emotional withdrawal (Kilpatrick & Williams, 1998).

The research has also focused on how parenting might be affected in the context of domestic violence. Empirical evidence suggests that the quality of parenting and the ability of both parents to meet their child's needs are compromised in households where domestic violence is present (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). For women who are victims of domestic violence, continuing abuse impacts parenting capacity, the parent–child relationship,

and the quality of the parent–child attachment (Holt et al., 2008; Ledenovsky, Huth-Bocks, Semel, & Shapiro, 2002).

Little research is available on how an abusive parent's behaviors impact their parent–child relationship (Guille, 2004; Hardesty et al., 2012). The information that exists suggests that abusive parents are less likely to be involved with their children, are more angry toward their children, lack empathy, are more likely to use negative parenting practices (e.g., slapping), are more controlling, are more authoritarian, and are less consistent (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Guille, 2004; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Holt et al., 2008; Jaffe et al., 2008). Results from Carter and Forssell's (2014) qualitative study of maltreated children's perceptions of their abusive fathers reveal that children perceived their father as a disengaged provider of care. Children's descriptions of a mere absence of violence by their father were judged as "good enough" fathering. This preliminary study provides some evidence regarding children's relationship with and perception of their abusive parent. At this time, no research has reported the frequency with which children who experienced or witnessed physical, verbal, or emotional abuse sever contact with their abusive parent after parental separation or in adulthood.

Johnston et al.'s (2005b) empirical study on multiple factors that correlate to children resisting contact with a parent postseparation revealed that 27% of the children from their sample experienced substantiated abuse (neglect, physical, or sexual) and domestic violence was encountered in 44% of families. Regression analysis also revealed that a father's alienation of the children against their mother is predicted by his own abusive behavior as a spouse. An abusive parent who engages in PABs is seen as demonstrating an extension of their physically abusive and controlling behaviors (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2008). These preexisting dynamics could have a profound impact on the nature of the parent–child relationship both pre- and postseparation.

HIGH INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

The quality of the parents' marriage as well as postseparation relationship is shown to have an effect on the parent–child relationship. Mothers in high-conflict marriages have been found to be less warm and empathetic toward their children, demonstrated less affection, were more rejecting, and used harsher erratic and coercive discipline with more yelling and physical punishment. Some fathers have been seen to withdraw from the parenting role and from their children in high-conflict marriages, compared to fathers in low-conflict marriages, and interactions with children were more insensitive and intrusive (Amato & Booth, 1996; Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kelly, 2012; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991).

Erel and Burman's (1995) meta-analytic review of the association between overall marital quality and the parent–child relationship found that

parents who have more satisfying and supportive marital relations are more available to respond sensitively to the needs of their children. In contrast, negative conflictual relationships could cause more irritable, emotionally drained, and less attentive and sensitive caregiving. Results from the review revealed a significant positive relationship between the quality of the marital relationship and the quality of the parent–child relationship with an effect size of $d = .46$ (Erel & Burman, 1995). The existence of a link between supportive spousal relations and parenting quality was strongly supported; compromised parenting is believed to be the main pathway by which marital conflict translates into poor parent–child relationships and has received substantial support in the research (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

POSTSEPARATION CONFLICT

Interparental conflict postseparation has been established as one of the major risks to the development of children's emotional and behavioral problems (Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987; Kelly, 2000). The mechanism by which interparental conflict influences child outcomes is not well understood. However, it is established that expressed conflict has negative implications on children's adjustment and the parent–child relationship (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001).

Studies yield a negative correlation between high interparental conflict and nonresident parent contact (typically fathers) and increased child adjustment problems (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pruett et al., 2003). Interparental conflict can negatively influence the parent–child relationship, which adversely affects child behaviors.

IMPACT OF STEPFAMILY

Researchers posit that a child's loss of time and attention from their parent on that parent's remarriage can be particularly upsetting for a child (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher, & Visher, 1996). Resentment and jealousy could permeate as the stepparent and child compete for the biological parent's time and attention, leading to a conflictual stepparent–child relationship. Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, and Pauk (2001) conducted a qualitative study examining conflict and conflict resolution techniques among 34 adults and 24 children from 17 stepfamilies. In their study, they found that loyalty conflicts were present in all but two families interviewed. In particular, children expressed feeling torn between their stepparent and their nonresidential parent. Remarriage is another difficult transition and risk factor for children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Dating, cohabitation, and remarriage threaten a nonresident parent's relationship with their children as contact

with nonresident parents often declines following either parent's remarriage (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

IMPACT OF SIBLINGS

Coleman et al.'s (2001) qualitative study of stepfamilies also revealed that siblings have a major influence on each other. In this particular study, older siblings had an influence on the younger siblings to undermine the stepparent while emphasizing the importance of the nonresidential parent. In addition, clinical evidence from reintegration intervention studies shows that although younger siblings of older children who reject a parent might initially have a "good enough" relationship with both parents, as time passes, younger siblings tend to follow older siblings' patterns and begin showing rejecting behaviors (Warshak, 2010). No direct empirical research has yet been conducted to evaluate the impact of siblings within the context of strained parent–child relationship postseparation.

Mesosystem Risk Factors

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Parental separation is associated with a decrease in children's standard of living with many disputes related to financial disagreements (Amato & Keith, 1991). Children living with mothers are more likely to have fewer economic resources than those living with fathers (Kelly, 2012). One hypothesis is that economic hardship contributes to strained parent–child relationships. This is supported by empirical research, which revealed a positive correlation between parents who consistently pay child support with better child adjustment and more frequent parent–child contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hetherington, 1997).

REDUCTION IN TIME

Research has also shown that divorce is associated with a decrease in the quantity and quality of contact between children and their noncustodial parent (typically fathers among the literature), which continues to decrease as time passes postseparation (Amato & Booth, 1996; Amato & Keith, 1991). This link might be created by attitudes and practices that lead to restrictions in father–child time and maintained through societal, institutional, and economic influences (Fabricius et al., 2010; Kelly, 2012). Among the most important is the notion of a one-size-fits-all parenting plan consisting of visitation occurring every other weekend and perhaps for a brief midweek visit. This parenting plan, developed at a time when there was a strong maternal preference, still persists in many jurisdictions (Kelly, 2005, 2007).

These guidelines, framed as being in the child's best interests, can deteriorate the father–child relationship by limiting the amount of contact between the father and the child. Although the research is clear that quantity of time is less important than father–child emotional closeness and authoritative parenting, a reduction in time will inevitably provide less opportunity to develop close emotional parent–child ties, thereby impacting the parent–child relationship.

Environmental factors

Other mesofactors worth noting would be changes to children's environment. For instance, if a parent moves to another neighborhood or community, children might resist or refuse contact as a result of being unfamiliar with the community (Freeman, 2011) and further away from their established social networks. In particular, friends and social relationships become important figures among older children. In these cases, children might rather stay at one parent's home not because they have an alignment toward that parent, but because their friends or significant other lives in the neighborhood. This is especially important for children who attempt to remove themselves from any ongoing parental conflict by spending more time with friends.

Macrosystem Risk Factors

Adversary system

Most of the empirical research examines the impact of court involvement on children's adjustment rather than the parent–child relationship. Bing, Nelson, and Wesolowski (2009) conducted a study comparing the effects of conflict, measured by court involvement, on children's adjustment. Results from their study revealed poorer child adjustment (e.g., aggression, academic problems) in parents litigating issues of custody or access and property. This supports previous research literature that suggests better coparental relationships and lower amounts of conflict are associated with better child adjustment (Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2012). Results of this study also indicate that in contrast to low-conflict, nonlitigating parents, high-conflict, litigating parents reported less agreement on their spouse's role in the lives of their children. There are no direct empirical research studies that link the parent–child relationship with a parent's involvement in a litigious adversarial system. However, one can extrapolate based on the review of the literature that the stress of being involved in an adversarial system will likely impact parenting capacity and thereby affect the parent–child relationship.

Likewise, given that high-conflict parents are often involved with other systems including the court, police, or child welfare authorities, it is not uncommon for children of high-conflict, litigating parents to be interviewed

by multiple professionals. Although no empirical studies have yet been conducted, one should question the impact that repeated investigations have on children as a result of their parents' fight. It could be hypothesized that children might resist or reject contact as a way of removing themselves from the situation.

DISCUSSION

To move away from simplified approaches to understanding the complexity of strained parent–child relationships, this article used an ecological approach incorporating empirical evidence of the multiple factors associated with parent–child contact problems. Figure 2 provides an illustration of a proposed model that takes into consideration the evidence for understanding the development of strained parent–child relationships. Using an ecological systems framework, the illustration breaks down the ontogenic, micro, meso, and macro risk factors relevant to each individual party, depicting their interconnected nature and potential influence on one another.

Using this framework, it is hypothesized that the development of contact problems is seldom exclusively the result of one parent's malicious actions toward another parent or the result of only poor parenting behaviors from the rejected parent (Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Garber, 2011; Johnston, Walter, & Olesen, 2005). Rather, it is a complex phenomenon, not explained by linear pathways of causation.

The implications for mental health professionals working with families that present with strained parent–child dynamics includes the need to conduct a thorough and comprehensive psychosocial assessment of the multiple factors that could be contributing to the parent–child relationship problems on a case-by-case basis. A comprehensive assessment is necessary to fully understand what conditions are both present and perpetuating the dynamics.

As a result of the multiple factors often apparent in these families, mental health professionals should consider using multiple treatment modalities including psychoeducation, cognitive behavioral therapy, behavioral skills training, individual therapy, and family therapy to address the components contributing to the dysfunctional family system. Each family should be treated both individually and when necessary and appropriate in joint coparent, parent–child, or family sessions. Evaluation of these interventions is critical to creating a more robust understanding of the process, implementation, and outcome factors that should be considered when considering the best approach for working with families involved in parent–child contact problems.

The research on strained parent–child relationships remains in its infancy. Research studies can provide clues to the potential factors that
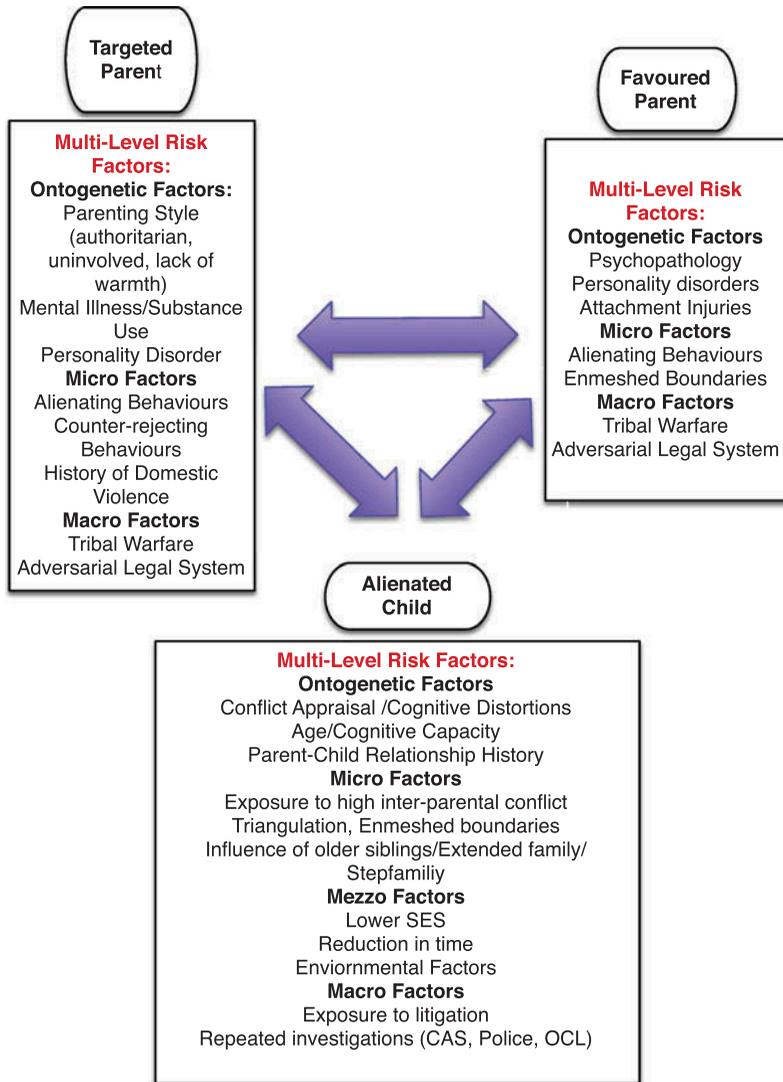
FIGURE 2 Multilevel risk factors associated with the development of strained parent–child relationships: An ecological systems approach.

should be considered within a comprehensive assessment, but caution is needed when extrapolating the findings to any one case.

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