


# Parent-Focused Psychological Evaluation: A New Approach to Understanding High-Conflict Family Dynamics

 [abpp.org/newsletter-post/parent-focused-psychological-evaluation-a-new-approach-to-understanding-high-conflict-family-dynamics](https://abpp.org/newsletter-post/parent-focused-psychological-evaluation-a-new-approach-to-understanding-high-conflict-family-dynamics)

December 18, 2025



High-conflict family law cases often stem from unresolved psychological dynamics between the parents rather than deficiencies in parenting practices alone. This article introduces the Parent-Focused Psychological Evaluation – the PFPE (Siegel, 2025) as an alternative forensic model that examines individual parental psychological functioning to assist the courts in understanding persistent conflict. Unlike traditional Child Custody or Parenting Plan Evaluations, the PFPE is designed to assess personality traits, emotional regulation, and conflict behaviors without involving the children directly. The model is increasingly relevant in jurisdictions across the country where prolonged and repetitive litigation clogs up the courts' dockets and impacts children's well-being.

Family courts routinely manage parental disputes that have escalated beyond legal disagreements into chronic psychological conflict. These high-conflict cases are characterized by repeated litigation, entrenched hostility and refusal to cooperate (Asen & Morris, 2020; Deck et al., 2023, Saini & Birnbaum, 2007). Traditionally, courts have used the child custody/parenting plan evaluation as the standard tool to guide determination of best interest issues, yet those evaluations often fail to identify the underlying psychological causes of the conflict. The PFPE shifts the focus from the child's environment and adjustment to the psychological functioning of the parents themselves. This approach aims to explain why parents cannot resolve conflict, not simply what parenting behaviors are observable.

The PFPE model is especially poignant where family courts are increasingly burdened by litigants repeatedly filing motions and petitions reporting alleged violations of orders and a variety of other transgressions. While some are relevant, it seems in these high conflict cases some of these litigants refuse to follow court's orders or they have so little emotional flexibility that the other side's slightest transgression causes an avalanche of negative emotions (Davies et al., 2018; Platts et al., 2024). It may be that one parent repeatedly disregards court orders, or they expect, even demand that their schedule and plans take precedence over the other parent's plans and possession time. These persistent interparental conflicts, especially when fueled by personality disorders, unresolved trauma, or rigid interpersonal patterns, pose significant risks to children's emotional development (Clark et al., 2004; Connell & Goodman, 2002; Laulik et al, 2013; Lee et al., 2024; Leichsenring et al., 2024; Sommerfeld & Bitton, 2020).

The PFPE gives the court an option of ordering psychological evaluations without requiring a full custody assessment. This allows the evaluator to provide the court clinically relevant information about the parents without placing further stress on the child or requiring evaluator determinations about legal or physical custody.

These evaluations are conducted by skilled, experienced psychologists trained in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health issues and disorders. They have received advanced training in human development, psychopathology and family systems. They should have advanced training in the administration and interpretation of psychological testing and clinical assessment techniques and practical experience in the clinical assessment of mental disorders. These practitioners should also have experience in the family court systems as child custody evaluators and/or providers of court-ordered therapy with court-involved families.

The PFPE provides the depth of assessment necessary by:

- Conducting multiple clinical interviews with each parent
- Utilizing validated psychometric instruments
- Reviewing collateral sources (court records, mental health history, CPS files)
- Integration of peer-reviewed research on personality pathology, family systems, and conflict behavior

## 1. Clinical Interviews

Each parent has multiple 1–2-hour interviews focused on their psychological history, relationship patterns, and response to conflict. The interviewer assesses:

- Personal history (family of origin issues, presence/absence of meaningful relationships, mental health history, medical/legal history, other important areas of inquiry)
- Descriptions of current parenting conflicts and past conflicts
- General mental status and emotional regulation capacity
- Attributional style (blame vs. insight)
- Cognitive rigidity and narrative control

## 2. Psychological Testing

PFPE employs personality testing to reveal traits such as:

- Narcissism, grandiosity, depression, antisocial, etc.
- Borderline features (affective instability, identity disturbance)
- Defensiveness and minimization of responsibility

## 3. Collateral Review

External data helps validate or challenge the parent's self-report. This includes:

- Past therapy records
- CPS investigations
- Legal pleadings
- Communications with schools or therapists

## 4. Literature Integration

Each evaluation integrates current psychological research linking specific personality features to the case's co-parenting dysfunction. This adds forensic credibility, so the Court understands this case is not unique but follows researched patterns. These patterns can be utilized by the evaluator to prepare case-specific psychological recommendations and the Court to issue informed, specific and rulings that can bring together mental health treatments when necessary and enforceable rulings holding litigants/parents accountable.

The Parent-Focused Psychological Evaluation is a timely and necessary innovation in forensic psychology for family law. By shifting the focus from parenting behaviors to the psychological traits that sustain legal conflict, PFPE offers courts a clinically sophisticated, legally defensible, and ethically appropriate alternative to traditional custody evaluations.

Overloaded court systems may find this model especially useful. PFPE is not a replacement for custody evaluations in cases involving abuse or direct risk to children, but it is an ideal alternative in high-conflict, high-litigation situations where the child's emotional distress is a secondary effect of parental dysfunction

As family courts seek more efficient and meaningful tools to resolve conflict and protect children, the PFPE model offers answers to questions like "*Why does the conflict persist?*" and "*What are the psychological barriers to resolution?*" making it indispensable in modern forensic practice.

## References

---

- Asen, E. and Morris, E. (2020). High-Conflict Parenting Post -Separation: The Making and Breaking of Family Ties. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Breaux, R.P., Harvey, E.A., and Lugo-Candelas, C.I. (2014). The role of parent psychopathology in the development of preschool children with behavior problems. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 43,5,777-790. doi: 10.1080/15374416.2013.836451
- Clark, D.B., Cornelius, J., Wood, D.S. and, Vanyukov, M. (2004) Psychopathology risk transmission in children of parents with substance use disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 161, 4:685-91. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.161.4.685
- Connell A.M. and Goodman, S.H. (2002). The association between psychopathology in fathers versus mothers and children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 5:746-73. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.128.5.746
- Davies, P.T., Coe. J.L., Hentges, R.F., Sturge-Apple, M.L. and Ripple, M.T. (2018). Interparental hostility and children's externalizing symptoms: Attention to anger as a mediator. *Developmental Psychology*, 54, 7:1290-1303. doi: 10.1037/dev0000520

- Deck, P., Eisensmith, S., Skinner, B. and Cafaro, J. (2023) Identifying Indicators of High-Conflict Divorce Among Parents: A Systematic Review. *Advances in Social Work*, 23, 2. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18060/25294>
- Dorrans, E.M., Paine A., Hobson C. and Goozen S.H. (2025). Associations between Parental Depression and Anxiety and Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Problems: Investigating Expressed Emotion as a Transdiagnostic Mechanism. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, Sep 24. doi: 10.1007/s10578-025-01916-1
- Fleck, L., Fuchs, A., Williams, K., Moehler, E., Resch, F., Koenig, J., and Kaess M. (2024) Child temperament as a longitudinal predictor of mother-adolescent interaction quality: are effects independent of child and maternal mental health? *European Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, Aug; 33 (8): 2791-2801. doi: 10.1007/s00787-023-02359-6
- Frosch, C.A., Schoppe-Sullivan, S.J., and O'Banion D.D. (2019) Parenting and Child Development: A Relational Health Perspective. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 15 (1):45-59. doi: 10.1177/1559827619849028.
- Laulik, S., Chou, S., Browne, K.D. and Allam, J. (2013). The link between personality disorder and parenting behaviors: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18, 644-655.
- Lee, J., Sloan, C.J., Fredman, S.J. and Fosco, G.M. (2024). Interparental Conflict Spillover: Examining Parental Depression Risk Pathways. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 38, 8, 1189-1200. doi.org/10.1037/fam0001264
- Leichsenring, F., Fonagy, P., Heim, N., Kernberg, O.F., Leweke, F., Luyten, P., Salzer, S., Spitzer, C., Steinert, C. (2024). Borderline personality disorder: a comprehensive review of diagnosis and clinical presentation, etiology, treatment, and current controversies. *World Psychiatry*, 23(1):4-25. doi: 10.1002/wps.21156
- Lubman, H.M., Nelson III, W.M., Hart, K.J. and Will, M.N. (2018). The relationship between parental depression and child well-being in the context of high conflict custody disputes. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 36, 4, 35-56.
- Platts, C.R., Sturge-Apple, M.L., and Davies, P.T. (2024) Hostile interparental conflict and parental discipline: Romantic attachment as a spillover mechanism. *Developmental Psychology*, 60, 7,1214-1226. doi: 10.1037/dev0001753
- Sager, A.A., Goodman, S.H. and Jeong, J., Bain, P.A. and Ahun, M.N. (2024). Effects of multi-component parenting and parental mental health interventions on early childhood development and parent outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 8, 9, 656 – 669
- Saini, M., & Birnbaum, R. (2007). Unraveling the label of "high conflict": What factors really count in divorce and separated families. *Journal of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies*. 51, 1, 14-20
- Siegel, J. (August 2025). Parent-Focused Psychological Evaluations, A Structured Approach to Understanding High-Conflict Family Dynamics. Webinar presentation produced by the Steve Frankel Group, LLC, webinar originated from Dallas, Texas.
- Smith, T.A., Kievit, R.A., Astle, D.E. (2023) Maternal mental health mediates links between socioeconomic status and child development. *Current Psychology*, 42 (25): 21967-21978. doi: 10.1007/s12144-022-03181-0.
- Sommerfeld, E. and Bitton, M. (2020) Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Compassion, and Aggressive Behavior: The Role of Borderline Features as a Mediator. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 11:44. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00044
- Tichovolsky, M.H., Griffith, S.F., Rolon-Arroyo, B., Arnold, D.H., and Harvey, E.A. (2018). A Longitudinal Study of Fathers' and Young Children's Depressive Symptoms. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 47 (sup1), 190-S204. doi: 10.1080/15374416.2016.1212357

## **Jeffrey C. Siegel, PhD, ABPP**

---

Board Certified in Clinical Psychology and Couple and Family Psychology  
Correspondence: [jeff@siegelphd.com](mailto:jeff@siegelphd.com)