

ABSTRACT

When conflict finds you. Working safely with families in the presence of high conflict.

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In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25%, according to a scientific brief released by the World Health Organization in March 2022. During the pandemic, therapists and families experienced increased pressures on mental health. As people's personal emotional resources dwindle, their capacity to cope with challenges decreases. Under these circumstances, the potential of interpersonal conflict increases, particularly in families.

Working with families experiencing high conflict is challenging for the therapist and the family. The risk of reports to the HPCSA/ SACSSP or other professional bodies increases in the presence of high conflict. Protecting the therapist, the family and the therapeutic process is vital if we are to get anywhere with the work. Mahatma Gandhi said that peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to cope with it.

Therapists working with children, often find themselves inadvertently caught up in conflicts, especially with parents who are divorcing or have divorced. For some families ongoing high conflict remains the modus operandi long after the divorce. This has long lasting negative effects on the co-parenting relationship and the children in these families. These children are often referred for therapy and the therapist find themselves navigating the conflict while trying to help the child.

This paper documents the types of challenges faced in working with families experiencing high conflict using practice-based evidence i.e., what has been tried and tested and found to work in my practice over a number of years. My clinical experience, my work as a mediator and my studies in neuroscience have informed the development of practical strategies to create a safe working environment for the family and the therapist.

We will consider, how to put structures in place to create safety from the first contact with the family; how to create safety when conflict appears unexpectedly while you are working; and how to keep yourself as therapist emotionally regulated so that you can continue to hold the process. We will also look at what to do when things go wrong. Examples of the various challenges commonly faced will be discussed.

The key take aways are looking at practical strategies for helping therapists safely navigate working with families where there is high conflict in order to protect those participating in the therapy, the therapy process and the therapists themselves.

References

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Bio

Janet Bytheway works as a clinical psychologist, mediator, supervisor/ consultant, and teacher. She has presented on working with complex families at conferences and workshops both locally and abroad. She is committed to working holistically and collaboratively with adults, children, and families and has a special interest in working with families in distress. For the past 30 years, she has been working with people experiencing challenges of various kinds and intensities. She initiated the Kids' Voices project which provided play therapy in schools to children in need, who might not have otherwise had access to therapeutic opportunities. She enjoys helping people make sense of their world.