

# High Conflict Families: Pitfalls of working with families experiencing divorce & family conflict

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**TRAVERSE**  
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# Objectives for today

Participants will understand  
Conflicted Family Dynamics

Participants will understand common  
mistakes that can perpetuate  
problematic family dynamics adding  
stress for student, family, school and  
school counselor

# Children in the Middle

“My mom and my therapist said I don’t have to listen to my dad.”—10 yr. old girl

“I don’t understand why my parents fight over me when there is enough of me to go around.” —12 yr. old boy

“I don’t know how to react to somebody advocating for me.”—16 yr. old girl

“When I turn 18, I’m getting the f--- out of here.”—17½ yr. old boy

# Signs of Hurt within a family

Guilt/Shame

Fear

A family member begins to question his/her own clarity and stability

Fixated on the problems related to substance abuse and/or mental illness.

**Reactivity:** Symptoms leading the family.

Family members feel alone, frightened, anxious, angry, tense, fearful, or frustrated much of the time; and, without outside assistance, they feel helpless to “fix” the problem.

Family members feel deeply hurt.

# Three Functions of Leadership

## Safety, Nurture, and Challenge

- ▶ Therapists
- ▶ Parents
- ▶ Teachers
- ▶ School Counselors
- ▶ Invitation to others: Will you let me lead you?
- ▶ Question for self-reflection: Do you know where you are leading them and do you have the skills to lead?

# Triangulation - The Drama triangle



Victim

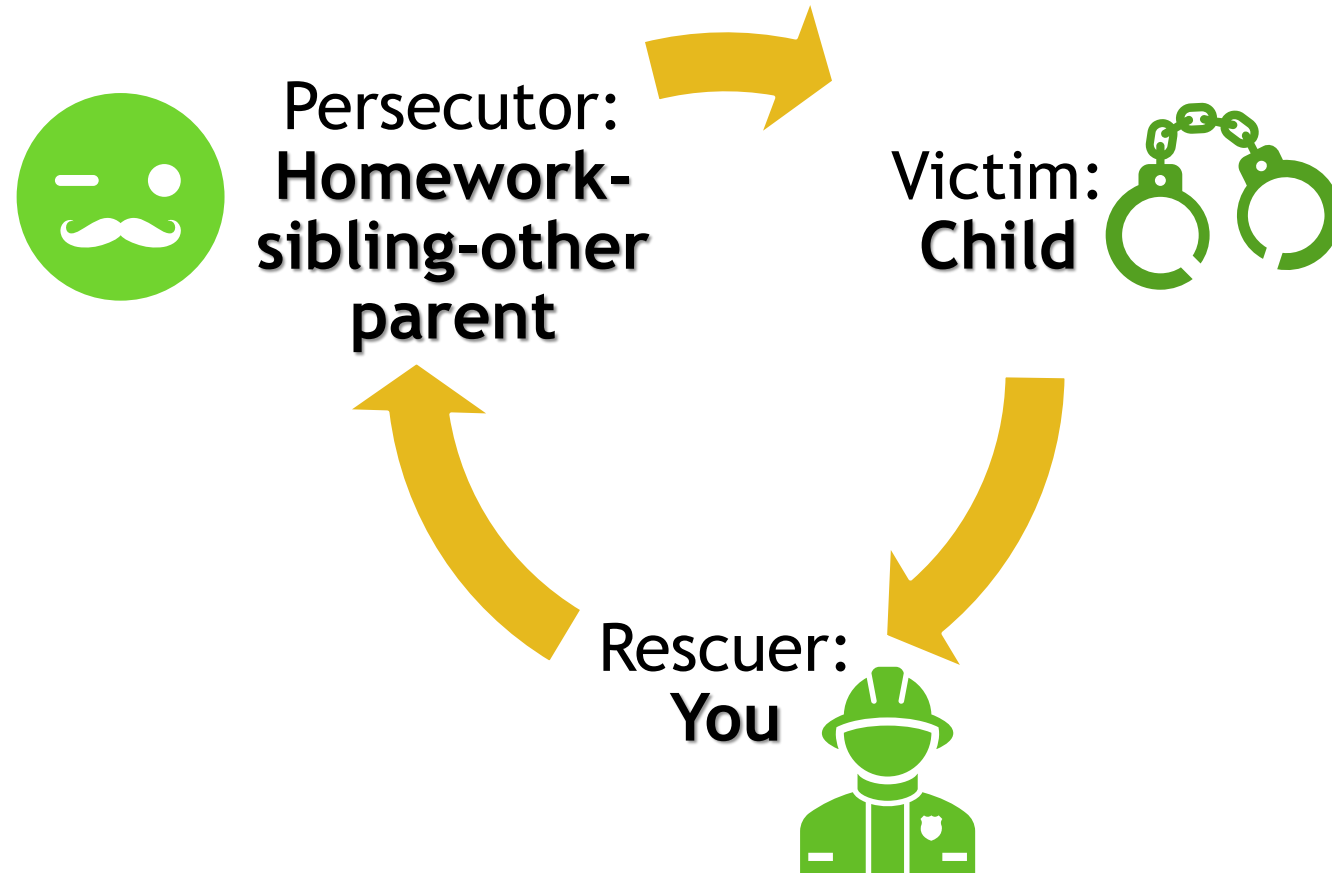


Rescuer



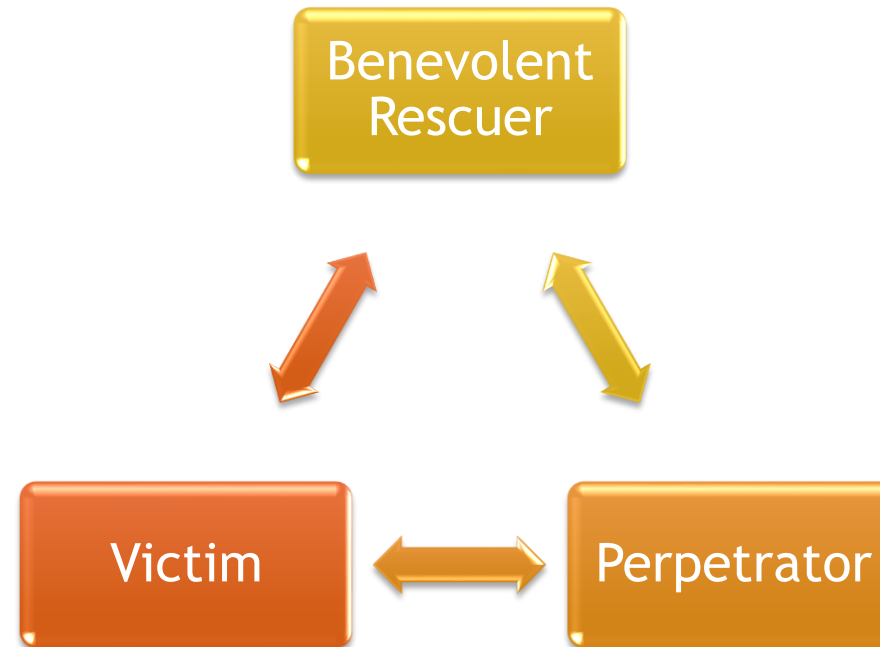
Persecutor

# Triangulation - The Drama triangle in action



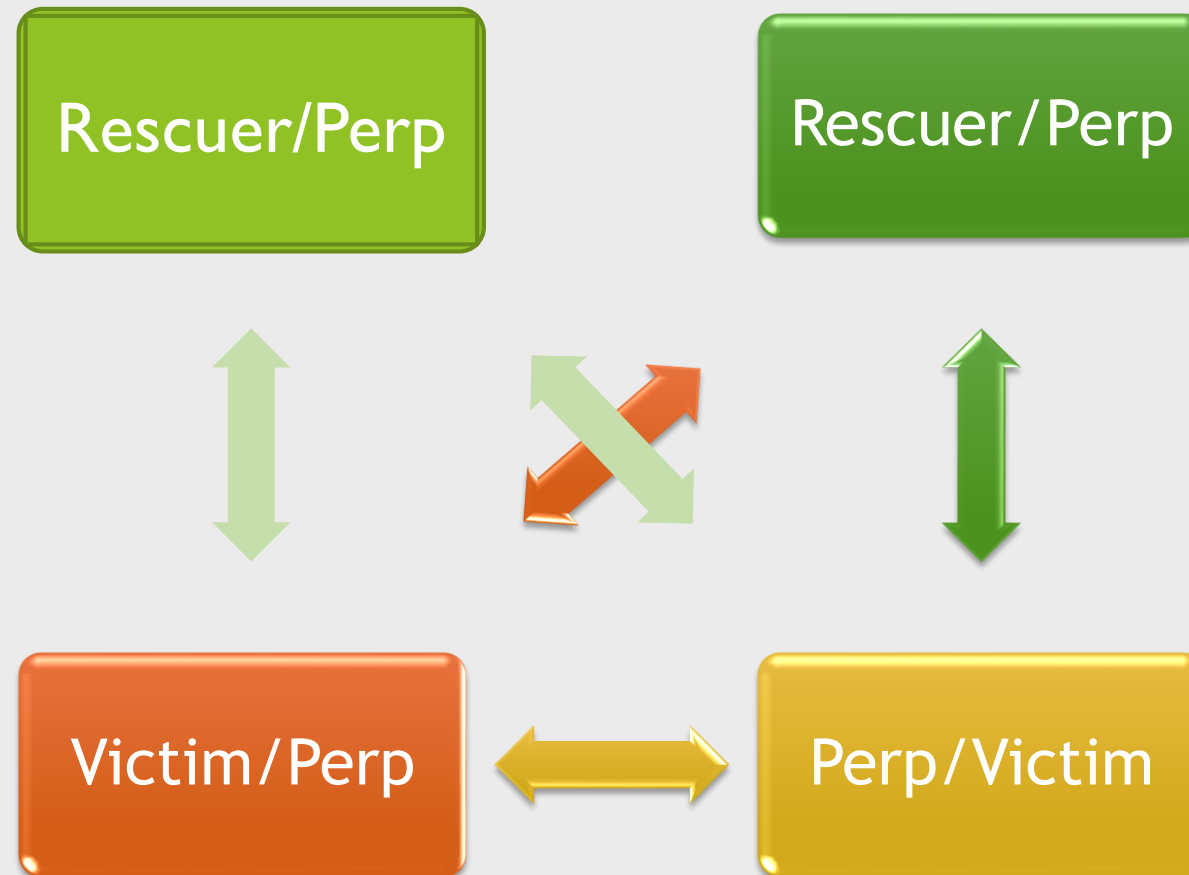
# Triangulation “a game we love to play”

- ▶ Victim Triangle
- ▶ People in the system ask for Rescuers
  - ▶ School Counselors
  - ▶ Attorneys/Courts
  - ▶ Evaluators
  - ▶ Therapists
  - ▶ Children
  - ▶ New Partner





# VRP Triangle x 2



# Parental Conflict & Impact on Children



Loyalty Bind/Choosing sides/Split identity



Somatic problems: Stomach aches, headaches, etc.



Depression, anxiety, STRESS, low problem solving or decision-making ability, anger



Exiting Patterns (isolation, technology/media, peer groups, over functioning and under functioning)



Rescuing Patterns (pleasing, taking care of others, martyr)



Extended family relationships and support are often not fully accessible



Attachment and Trust: lies, repairing conflict

# Parental Conflict & Impact on Children



Lying



Symptomatic (Behavior changes)



Difficulty resolving conflict



Difficulty making decisions (Perfectionism, letting others decide)



Elevation into decision making (i.e. custody, parenting time.)



Isolation

# Resolving Parental Conflict

## Why is this important? Short term effects

- ▶ Parental Conflict creates symptoms in children
- ▶ Parent behaviors are having an impact right now.
  - ▶ Children create mistaken beliefs about their parents' behavior

“It’s my fault”

“I have to be two different people to please parents”

“If I take care of my parent, they won’t be sad or worry”

“I have to align with one parent to be OK”

# Resolving Parental Conflict

## Why is this important? Long Term Effects

- ▶ **Parents' conflict role-modeling impacts children and their development**
  - ▶ Children learn exit strategies from parents
  - ▶ No understanding of repairing relationships
  - ▶ Win/Lose; Right/Wrong beliefs
  - ▶ Unable to receive security, significance, & belonging from parental unit
    - ▶ Will find it in other ways
- ▶ **The family system continues**
  - ▶ Parents will become grandparents
    - ▶ Unresolved conflict will impact further generations

# Overt & Covert Interference

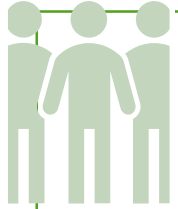
Unilateral decision making

Refusal to communicate  
with other parent

Disparaging the other  
parent

- Coaching children
- Extended family
- Step-parent

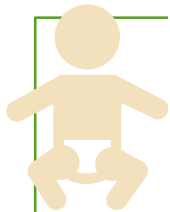
# Child Elevation



Adultification



Parentification



Infantilization



# Adorable Girl Tells her Divorced Parents to be Friends

[https://youtu.be/DCNUlEfD\\_dg](https://youtu.be/DCNUlEfD_dg)

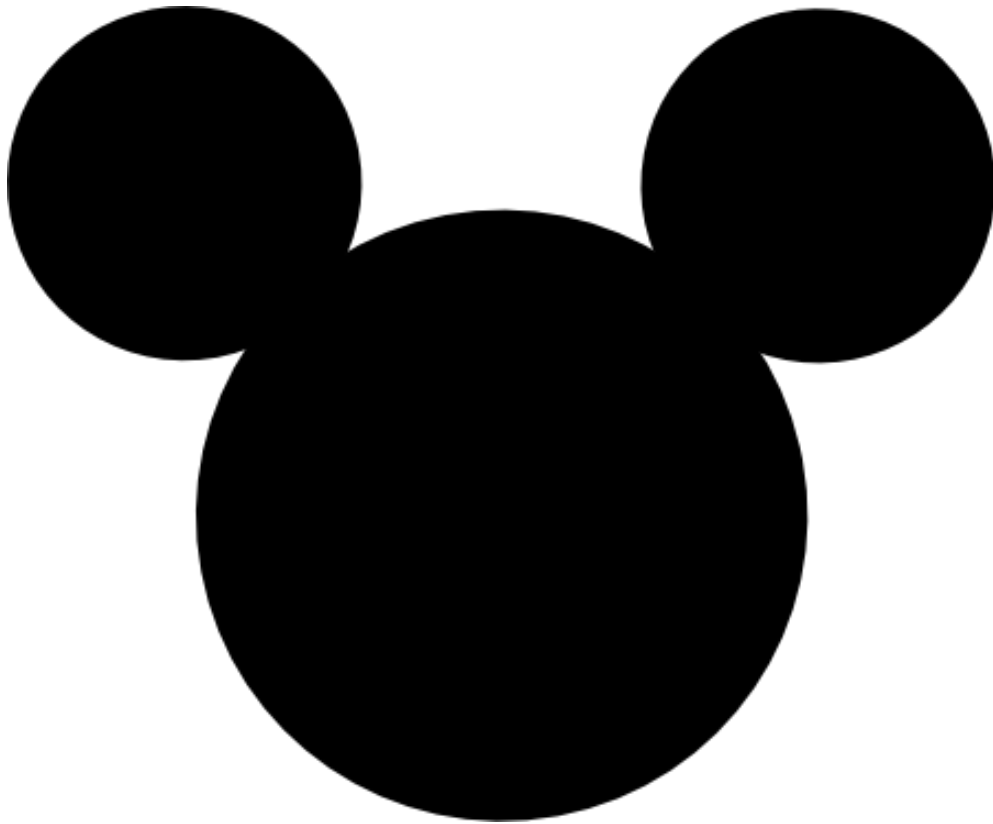


# Child as the symptom bearer

- ▶ Toxicity in a system create a developmentally inappropriate load for children and youth to bear - this has implications for a young person's development and can manifest in many symptoms



# “The Disney Dad/Mom”



- ▶ The system is set up to create this
- ▶ Confusing for children
- ▶ Condescending for both parents



- ▶ **THE HIGH/ LOW ROAD**
- ▶ **Fosters an attitude of one parent being better than the other**
- ▶ **Furthering unhealthy Martyr attitude**
- ▶ **Condescending to both parents and elitist**

# Homeostatic Power Imbalance

All moves, requests, changes in conflicted families are about the balance of power

Identifying the conflict without taking a side shifts the power alignment

Homeostasis

Individuals working without a systemic context often intensify systemic resistance to change



## Relational Landscape of Conflicted Families

- ▶ "The Exiting Pattern"
  - ▶ Prominent in nearly every conflicted family
  - ▶ "When I feel anxious / When I feel uncomfortable:
  - ▶ I leave
    - ▶ I exit
    - ▶ I quit
    - ▶ I cut out people from my life
    - ▶ I give up
  - ▶ Exit to other parent to complain

# Relational Landscape of Conflicted Families (cont.)



- ▶ “Inverted Leadership Position”
  - ▶ Children are elevated into inverted leadership positions in the family
  - ▶ Developmentally incapable of providing own needs to support healthy maturation into adulthood



# Post-divorce adjustment patterns (children)

## Competent-Opportunist

- **Low** levels of conflict resolution & parentification, **High** levels of conflict in family of origin, One close supportive parent, **High** levels of social support & interpersonal efficacy

## Competent-Caring

- **High** levels of conflict resolution, sibling-focused parentification, social support, interpersonal efficacy, **Low** levels of conflict in family of origin, Loving and supportive mother

## Competent-at-a-cost

- **Moderate to high** levels of conflict resolution, **Moderate** levels of interpersonal efficacy & social support, **High** levels of parent-focused parentification, **Low** levels of conflict in family of origin, One parent responsible for high levels of parentification

## Good enough

- **Average** scores across all indicators

## Aggressive-Insecure

- **Low** levels of conflict resolution, interpersonal efficacy and parentification, **High** levels of conflict in family of origin, Two neglectful parents, Almost no social support.

# Protective factors for children

Parents that  
work together

Authoritative  
Parenting

Safety Nurture  
Challenge

Adult Mentors -  
Other adults  
outside the family  
that ***do not  
take sides***

Parent involved  
in children's  
school



# Pitfalls for counselors in working with families in conflict



Advocating instead of providing counseling or advice. (e.g. Speaking for someone)



Jumping into a rescuer role.



Not managing your own stuff



Lack of clarity in giving guidance, not clear on recommendations.



Over talking.

# Pitfalls for counselors in working with families in conflict



Focus only on the symptom's the family or child is experiencing (symptoms are usually point to something else)



Talking to or helping only one parent in conflicted families



Reacting versus responding



Staying on something too long/Trying harder than the family



Biases limit your relationship building

# Therapists & Counselors and Systems in Pain

More “Traps”  
with Families  
that are highly  
conflicted

Empathic Distress - may lead to exiting

Compassion Fatigue - we work REALLY hard with these families

- When we work too hard we make mistakes

Act out of our counter-transference

- I do this work because...
- I don't want to include or talk with that parent because...

Parallel Process - replicating the system

- With individual therapy
- With family therapy

# AFCC — Professional Objectivity

Association of Family and Conciliation Court

<https://www.afccnet.org/Resource-Center/Practice-Guidelines-and-Standards>

Professional handouts for court involved therapy

<https://www.afccnet.org/Resource-Center/Resources-for-Families>

Parent and family handouts

PC-parenting consultant

- ▶ Every family has different scope of PC decision making



## GUIDELINES FOR COURT INVOLVED THERAPY

- ← Children's behavior and statements may vary markedly based on the circumstances of treatment.
- ← The CIT has an enhanced ***obligation to consider multiple treatment hypotheses*** and be knowledgeable about children's developmental tasks and needs.
- ← The CIT should use caution to ensure that they have adequate data on which to base any opinions or assessments, and to form and express such opinions only within confines of the ***therapeutic role and available information***, while remaining cognizant of the impact of Court involvement on the family and on treatment information.

## GUIDELINES CONTINUED

- ← The CIT must, whenever possible, ***obtain each parent's perspective*** in the treatment process and maintain professional objectivity when interpreting statements and behaviors of children. The CIT should use caution in interpreting statements, play or drawings that appear to express positions on adult issues to avoid inaccurate or incomplete assessment of a child's developmental needs, expressed thoughts and feelings.
- ← While it is common in traditional treatment for one parent to be more involved in child treatment than the other, this therapy structure creates a risk in court involved treatment. ***A CIT should consider both parent-child relationships and each parent's perspective in court-involved treatment.***

# ETHICS

- ▶ Do no harm
- ▶ Case Note
- ▶ Consultation
- ▶ Releases of Information
- ▶ When you talk to other professionals, let them know that your notes might be available to the other parent

# What is the purpose of Mandated Reporting?

## THE HEALTH, SAFETY AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

- ▶ “WHILE IT IS RECOGNIZED THAT MOST PARENTS WANT TO KEEP THEIR CHILDREN SAFE, SOMETIMES CIRCUMSTANCES OR CONDITIONS INTERFERE WITH THEIR ABILITY TO DO SO. WHEN THIS OCCURS, THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF CHILDREN MUST BE OF PARAMOUNT CONCERN. INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION EFFORTS MUST ADDRESS IMMEDIATE CONCERNS FOR CHILD SAFETY AND THE ONGOING RISK OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT AND SHOULD ENGAGE THE PROTECTIVE CAPACITIES OF FAMILIES.”
- ▶ [MINN. STAT. 626.556, SUBD. 1]



# What Needs to be Reported?

## MANDATED REPORTERS ARE REQUIRED TO REPORT...

- ▶ THE LAW REQUIRES MANDATED REPORTERS TO MAKE A REPORT IF THEY KNOW OF OR HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE A CHILD IS BEING NEGLECTED OR ABUSED, OR HAS BEEN NEGLECTED OR ABUSED WITHIN THE PRECEDING THREE YEARS.
- ▶ NEGLECT
- ▶ PHYSICAL ABUSE
- ▶ THREATENED INJURY
- ▶ SEXUAL ABUSE
- ▶ THREATENED SEXUAL ABUSE
- ▶ DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
- ▶ PREDATORY OFFENDERS
- ▶ SEXUALLY EXPLOITED YOUTH

# Neglect - Neglect is the most common form of maltreatment. It is usually a failure of a child's caregiver to:

- ▶ Provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical or mental health care, education or appropriate supervision
- ▶ Protect a child from conditions or actions that endanger the child
- ▶ Take steps to ensure that a child is educated as required by law.

The following also may be considered neglect:

- ▶ Exposing a child to certain drugs during pregnancy
- ▶ Causing emotional harm to a child.

# Consultation

- ▶ When you know you don't have all the answers, where do you go?
- ▶ Consultation is critical and valuable
  - ▶ Working with families and kids can trigger are own "stuff".
  - ▶ Document and Consult for ethical reasons.

# Traverse Counseling & Consulting

Traverse provides services for families, couples, adults, children and teens with a variety of family systems issues:

- ▶ Family Transitions
- ▶ Parenting Issues
- ▶ Child, Individual, Couple Therapy
- ▶ Co-Parenting/ Divorced Families
- ▶ Substance Abuse
- ▶ Video Game/Internet addiction
- ▶ Dispute Resolution services
- ▶ Training and Consultation



# Marriages in Distress: Part 1

Defensiveness, Criticism, Contempt, Stonewalling

Perpetual problems/ inflexible or rigid thinking/ anxiety around differing perspectives

Blame: difficulty taking ownership for own part, pathologizing the other

Easily enter into conflict and don't know how to get out gracefully, attempts at repair are rejected or escalate the conflict

# Marriages in Distress: Part 2

Triangulation (kids, extended family, friends, professionals)

Elevation of children into decision-maker

Negative Sentiment Override

Substance Abuse/Coercion & Control

Emotional Dis-regulation

# Couples Engaged in Divorce

Decision Made to Divorce

Difficulty managing decisions related to their children

Polarizing of the other spouse

Polarizing of extended family and friends: "Taking Sides."

# Post-Divorce

Most families are trying to "live" into this new reality of two homes.

Children are likely living in two households.

Parents may have not completed their grief/loss work around this new reality

Shame and Guilt

Children may struggle emotionally

Each parent must create a new "dream" or "story" for their life.

- Relationship with self

- Relationship with kids

- Relationship with co-parent