

Course Outline: Working with High Conflict Parenting in Family Therapy

Instructors: CFTC team (to.be.determined).

1. Course Description

High Discrepancy Parenting (HDP) refers to situations in which individuals who claim to be part of a parenting subsystem present with highly conflictive views regarding each other's parenting practices and/or what constitutes the best interest of the child (BIC). These families frequently have a history of legal involvement, often labeled as "high conflict" within the justice system. They may face contentious separations or divorces, with repeated litigation over parenting time, finances, or daily caregiving. A key feature of HDP involves serious communication problems (from lack of, to harmful, to "petrified" communication) which often lead to further mistrust and relational pain. Consequently, it is not uncommon for skilled and compassionate therapists to experience threats to their wellbeing, sense of competence, and even career prospects.

This course provides an in-depth exploration of risk management strategies for working with high conflict parenting (HCP) situations. Drawing on decades of experience working with families and engaging in Research as Daily Practice (St. George & Wulff, 2025), the Calgary Family Therapy Centre (CFTC) has developed this online course to equip therapists with practice-based knowledge and therapeutic skills that enable them to effectively and sustainably support couples and families navigating the complexities of HCP.

The course emphasizes a structured, three-staged therapeutic process: clinical intake, readiness assessment, and therapeutic intervention. Each stage is designed to support the co-construction of the BIC, helping families move from adversarial dynamics toward more collaborative and child-centered approaches. Special attention is given to common beliefs or "myths" (e.g., about therapy, parenting, stepfamilies) that only too often get in the way of co-parenting collaboration.

Learning activities in this course include:

- Lectures: conceptual discussion of distinctions coupled with learning from case-based presentations led by the instructor(s).
- Group consultation: Students will be given the opportunity to consult with the group and the instructor about their own work situated in their context of practice.
- Individual consultation: Each student will be given an opportunity to receive a one-hour individualized, confidential consultation from a CFTC-accredited clinical supervisor.
- Readings: Supportive reading material relevant to each lecture/learning unit will be suggested by the instructor
- Discussion forums: Students will reflect on readings and lectures asynchronously throughout the course.

The online synchronous component will take place via Microsoft Teams. To best succeed in the course, students are expected complete (asynchronously) the assigned readings on their own; and participate in online discussion forums. In all, the course involves 39 hours of instruction, including

synchronous group meetings (18 hours), synchronous individual and group consultations (3 hours), and asynchronous activities (18 hours).

There dates and times of our synchronous sessions are indicated in the course schedule.

2. Course Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the characteristics and challenges of High Conflict Parenting (HCP), and the connections between HCP and High Discrepancy Parenting (HDP).
- Understand and implement risk management strategies when working with HCP in therapeutic settings, using a systems theory perspective.
- Implement a systems-informed, three-staged therapeutic process aimed at optimizing conditions for successful therapy.
- Manage therapeutic boundaries to optimize therapeutic effectiveness while navigating common high-risk situations associated with HCP.
- Conversationally bringing forth and reflecting on local practices, values, discourses, relatings, emotionings and other situated relational knowledges influencing and/or relevant to HCP.
- Collaborating with families in realizing their hopes vis-à-vis co-parenting collaboration and parent-child(ren) relationships, in culturally-relevant ways.

3. Learning Resources

- Required Textbooks:
- Additional Readings:

4. Class Schedule

Classes will be held online, on Mondays, starting January 5, 2026.

Date	Topic
Jan 5, 2026	A systems theory perspective on HCP: Defining and Characterizing HCP, IPscopic Maps, and Family vs. Family Therapy Systems.
Jan 12, 2026	Family Therapy System: Befriending Relational Disquiet, Research as Daily Practice, and Setting Boundaries for generative work.

Date	Topic
Jan 19, 2026	Initial Stages: Co-constructing Readiness for Therapy
Jan 26, 2026	Therapeutic Stage I: Co-constructing the Parent-Child Relationship
Feb 2, 2026	Therapeutic Stage II: Increasing Co-parenting Collaboration
Feb 9, 2026	Therapeutic Stage III: Co-constructing Best Interest of Children
Feb 16, 2026	Therapeutic Stage IV: Working with Stepfamilies
Feb 23, 2026	Group Consultations
Mar 2, 2026	Group Presentations (MAY REQUIRE MORE THAN 1 SESSION)

5. Additional Classroom Conduct and Related Information

- Guidelines for Online Meetings: Respectful communication, confidentiality, and active participation are expected.
- Attendance Policy: Regular attendance is mandatory. Notify the instructor in advance for any absences. When unable to participate live due to the time difference or unforeseen circumstances, inform the instructor in advance and propose and implement propose an alternative participation activity (e.g., watch the recordings, submit a brief reflection, and actively contribute to the follow-up online discussion).
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6. Assessment Components

- Participation: 40%
- Weekly Reflections: 20%
- Final Group Presentation: 40%

7. Grading

- A: 90-100%
- B: 80-89%
- C: 70-79%
- D: 60-69%
- F: Below 60%

8. Course Evaluation

- Students will complete a course evaluation at the end of the term to provide feedback on the course content and instruction.

9. Additional Suggested Readings

- Bernstein, A. C. (2007). Re-Visioning, Restructuring, and Reconciliation: Clinical Practice With Complex Postdivorce Families. *Family Process*, 46(1), 67-78.
- Baris, M. A. (2000). *Working with High-Conflict Families of Divorce: A Guide for Professionals*. Jason Aronson.
- Cohen, O., & Levite, Z. (2012). High-Conflict Divorced Couples: Combining Systemic and Psychodynamic Perspectives. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 34(4), 387-402.
- Emery, R. E. (2012). *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. Guilford Press.
- Sibley, D. S., & Turns, B. A. (2021). Treating the Difficult Divorce: A Practical Guide for Psychotherapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 47(3), 803-804.

Are you interested in this course and require more information?

Please write us an email to cftc@familytherapy.org to check for availability and Early Bird Rates.