

**RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN OF HIGH-CONFLICT SEPARATED/DIVORCED  
PARENTS**

**By**

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**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
The University of Manitoba  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Faculty of Social Work**

**University of Manitoba**

**Winnipeg**

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## ABSTRACT

Using qualitative research methods, specifically a grounded theory methodology, the research study was designed to identify the resilient attributes of children from high-conflict, separated or divorced families. Children between the ages of nine and twelve as well as the parents from twelve families participated in in-depth interviews and a focus group. A primary question was how the interactions of family and community members promote resilient behaviour in children of high-conflict parents. The research also examined children's perceptions of both the interparental conflict and the interceding actions of community members and attempted to identify the barriers to resilience as experienced by children in these families.

Results from this study offer a proposition and a substantive-level theory. The proposition suggests that separated families in high-conflict who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as stepparents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External support systems including friends, teachers, counsellors and extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families then enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict. The ongoing inter-parental conflict is the primary adversity or barrier faced by these children.

Using the results of this study will allow both clinicians and policy makers to make informed decisions regarding the needs of this population. The results suggest that

protective factors need to be put into place in order for children to maximize their ability to use their resilient characteristics. This may include building models of resilience based upon key strategies that include education, as well as building or using family, community, and cultural resources. For example, mandatory education classes could be provided to the family as a way of identifying and validating the role of the stepparent or grandparent. Legislative changes allowing for consistent access between children and grandparents would reinforce the family cohesion as well as providing a secure refuge for the children.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Brad McKenzie, my PhD advisor and mentor for all his time and energy. He has provided invaluable expertise, encouragement, and patience at each phase of this research study. He helped me to understand and appreciate the subtleties of research design and analysis. Secondly, I acknowledge my internal committee member, Dr. Brenda Bacon. She made herself available to answer questions and offer encouragement at the times they were most needed. I would also like to thank my other two committee members, Dr. Caroline Piotrowski and Dr. Carol Stuart for their assistance and encouragement.

I acknowledge the support of family, friends and colleagues, particularly my husband. Various friends and family members have provided me with ongoing encouragement and emotional support throughout this process.

This research study was conducted with the financial assistance of The Winnipeg Foundation.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my husband, Michel LeBlanc and to my daughter, Jasmine. Over the years my husband has provided me with invaluable emotional support. As well he has helped me to understand that if we are able to access our resilient attributes, we can accomplish a great deal. My daughter, Jasmine has shown me that through her adaptation to new circumstances she has been able to move forward to find joy and happiness.

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## CHAPTER I

### OVERVIEW OF STUDY

Professionals from the judicial, legal, and social service systems attempt to help families that continue to engage in ongoing conflict after separation and divorce. They often shake their heads in frustration as family members continue to litigate and entrench themselves further in their positions. This special population of families draws on many resources from the various systems, which reflects a need to explore alternative ways of working with these families. Alternative strategies, either designed as preventive programs or as intervention approaches, find their origins linked to specific needs and strengths outlined in the research of this population. This research study attempted to uncover the strengths of the children within these families, thereby providing help to practitioners in finding effective interventions to enhance these strengths. As well as providing new information on this topic, results from this study have both practice and policy implications.

Over the past few decades there has been a great deal of research into family issues pertaining to separation and divorce. As well, research is beginning to focus on issues pertaining to specific aspects of the separation process, specifically interparental conflict. However, there has been very little information on the resilience of children within these families. The results of this research provide insight into what promotes resilience for these children, i.e., how children find positive ways of adapting despite their parents' ongoing conflict.

## **Research Questions**

There are three main research questions in this study. They are listed below.

- 1) How do the interactions of family and community members promote resilient behaviour in children of high-conflict parents?
- 2) How do the children in these families perceive the conflict between their parents and the interceding actions of community members?
- 3) What are the barriers to resiliency in these children and how do the children attempt to overcome these barriers?

## **Purpose of Research**

Research exploring the experiences of children within a particular population was the focus of this study. The special population of families explored in the study are those who have continued to exhibit high levels of destructive conflict after a separation or divorce. This particular population is a source of frustration to many systems and as yet, there does not appear to be a strength-based way of intervening with these families. While there has been research completed on the negative effects of separation and divorce of children, little has been directed towards how children find ways to successfully manage these effects. This research study focused on the resilience of the children within these families. The study questioned how the actions of family and community members promote resilience in children and the meaning the children attach to these actions. These questions move the research into an exploration of the interactions within the families and the community that contribute to children's resilient behaviour. Within this population of families, questions about how children cope and

exhibit resilient behaviour have rarely been addressed in the literature. Results from this study enhance our current knowledge in this area.

Within the literature on separation and divorce, quantitative research or a meta-analysis of published literature is the research approach often used. While this research has provided general information with respect to issues associated with the ongoing conflict between parents, it has not provided insight into how children perceive and understand the negative interactions of their parents. This study allowed for a deeper and rich exploration of this phenomenon through a naturalistic inquiry to research. For example, in the past quantitative research has focused on indicators of resilience for children (Garmezy & Masten, 1991). However, this does not give us information on how children understand the idea of resilience, nor how they use their strengths, particularly within high-conflict families. Through an inductive method, generalizations based on the stories of children and their parents within high-conflict families helped to build towards a substantive level theory.

Children in families of divorce are part of a family system. From a systems perspective, the interaction among family members helps shape the behaviours, relationships, and communication patterns that the family creates over its life course (Germain, 1991). As such, children feel the effects of what happens between their parents, both before and after a parental separation. Separation and/or divorce of one's parents has long been recognized as a stressful event in children's lives, putting them at risk for adjustment and development problems.

If we understand children's reaction to separation and divorce from a systems perspective, it is probable that parents who can successfully negotiate co-parenting

issues after their separation are more likely to have children who can manage the changes in the family. If parents continue to have problems, the children will need help with both understanding and responding to the disruption of the equilibrium in the family system.

Research has shown that it is possible for children to recover from the parental separation when the family can successfully negotiate a new family structure (Cummings & Davis, 1994; Issacs, Montalvo & Abelson, 1986). However, the issue of ongoing hostility between parents may prevent the family from moving forward. Parental conflict is positively associated with a variety of indicators of children's maladjustment, including conduct disorders, anxiety, and aggression (Grych & Finchman, 1990; Radovanovic, 1993). Direct negative effects of high conflict include children's modelling of parental behaviours, failure to learn appropriate social interaction skills, and physiological effects such as increased heart rate and increased blood pressure (Cummings & Davis, 1994). Radovanovic (1993) suggests the form and quality of family relationships and arrangements after separation are more predictive of children's adjustment than the separation itself. Conflict between parents, both before and after the parental separation, has been shown to affect children's well being, thus it is a variable that has a negative effect on children's post-divorce adjustment. While many variables may contribute to a child's problems after a parental separation, parental conflict appears to be a primary issue related to poor adjustment among children of divorce (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Davis, Hops, Alpert & Sheeber, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Johnston, Gonzalez & Campbell, 1987; Kelly, 2000; Kline & Johnston, 1991).

As a way of understanding the cost to children exposed to parental conflict, we can focus on the numbers of parents still embroiled in conflict after the separation. Research in this area tells us that about one fourth to one third of divorcing couples report high degrees of hostility and discord over the daily care of their children many years after the separation (Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). These couples may also engage in ongoing litigation, high degrees of anger and distrust, incidents of verbal abuse, and intermittent physical aggression for several years after the separation (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Radovanovic (1993) maintains that continuing legal disputes between parents is a strong indicator of high conflict. These legal disputes and other indicators of ongoing interparental conflict are then reflected in the children from these families.

Children from high-conflict families are seen in the schools and in community agencies. They may be assessed by court social workers as part of a family evaluation regarding custody and access. Or they may seek the support of a school counsellor or peer support group. Questions that clinicians and researchers encounter with these families are related to both the vulnerabilities and strengths that these children display. Werner (1990) describes the concepts of resilience and protective factors as the positive counterparts to the constructs of vulnerability and risk factors. Resilience is a word that denotes a process, a way in which individuals show positive effects despite having experienced some form of adversity. The idea of exploring a strengths perspective within research reflects the growing need to emphasize health instead of pathology. Norman (2000) suggests that the push from pathology to strengths began in the early 1980's. She describes resiliency as the attribute, the concept or the process that

epitomizes and operationalizes the strengths perspective (p. 3). Building on these ideas, the results from this study further our understanding of the concept of resilience, particularly within children from high-conflict families.

This study attempted to help answer questions that move towards a strengths perspective. For example, how can the strengths of children be understood and enhanced? What can parents do to help their children utilize resilient behaviours? What community resources can be put in place for these families? Should such programs be mandatory? In order to find answers to these questions, we need to have a greater understanding of the phenomenon of resilience and how it interacts with other aspects of family and community functioning. This study focused on exploring the strengths and interactions of these children with other family members following their parent's separation. In doing so, it explored the concept of resilience, both the characteristics and barriers to it.

As a way of building towards a better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of resilience within this population, specific research questions focused on how children cope, both in the past and the present with interparental conflict. Research questions attempted to delineate differences within the children with respect to the interactions in their families. As a way of moving beyond the indicators of resilience, the research questioned how the interaction within and between family and community presented the children with the ability to adapt in a positive manner to their stressful environment. This provided a focus of how to move forward with the research and practice implications in this area. It also provided a way to conceptualize the phenomenon of resilience and how it relates to ways of coping.

## **Research Population**

Issues relating both to separation and divorce as well as resilience are describe in Chapter Two; however, separation and divorce can be summarized as a normative process for families. When parents separate there is often a period of high conflict, sometimes related to resolving the issues of the divorce itself. After the first or second year following the separation, there is generally a decrease in conflict between the parents. However, approximately 10 - 25% of couples continue to experience moderate to high levels of hostility and conflict after the initial postseparation period (Garrity & Barris, 1994; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). There are varying ways that this conflict is expressed. However, the most common form of active disputing is verbal abuse, which consists of insulting the other parent, belittling, demeaning interchanges by phone or in-person, often at the time of the children's transition (Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

There has been a great deal of discussion through the literature on the effects of marital conflict on children. The specific population of children that hear their parents fight both before and after the separation find a way of incorporating this behaviour into their understanding of family functioning. Research consistently shows that continuing interparental conflict is one of the most important predictors of variability in children's post-divorce adjustment (Ayoub, Deutsh, & Maraganore, 1999; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Emery, 1999). Cummings and Davis (1994) contend that approximately 40 – 50% of children exposed to severe marital hostility exhibit extreme behaviour problems. These consist of both behavioural and emotional disturbances. Emery (1999) states that symptoms include depression, withdrawal, poor social competence, health problems,

poor academic performance, and conduct-related problems. However, not all children respond in the same way to high degrees of conflict between their parents. Exploring the mediating actions of both community and family relationships may help to illuminate the differences in children's responses to interparental conflict. Concentrating on understanding which coping strategies are successful can lead to a further understanding of resiliency within these children.

Resilience has been described as successful adaptation under adverse circumstances (Luthar & Ziegler, 1991). In research over the past few decades resilience has often been explored from a quantitative standpoint, i.e., to attempt to understand the predictors of successful adaptation. Longitudinal studies have attempted to document and analyze the short-term versus the long-term effects of protective factors that buffer a stressful life event. Research has shown that there are large individual differences among high-risk children in their responses to both negative and positive circumstances in their environment (Werner, 1990). This suggests the need to examine more closely what constitutes the differences in these children, thereby being able to promote particular clinical interventions. Using a qualitative approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of the individual differences, i.e., how the child and other family members understand the issues and what causes the differences amongst the children. It allows us to hear the children's voices, thereby gaining a sense of how they perceive their parents' conflict. This information allows for a better understanding of the strengths within children in high-conflict families. Ultimately, it equips practitioners with prevention and intervention techniques that are best suited for these families.

## **Orientation and Methodology**

The methodology and design used in this study are described in more detail in Chapter Three. The research orientation in this study is based on social constructionism, which suggests a need to understand the meaning of the phenomenon of resilience from the perspective of the child and the family. This epistemological stance emphasizes the need to understand how people know themselves and their worlds.

Qualitative research, specifically the grounded theory approach is a research orientation consistent with social constructionism as it focuses on understanding the subjects' interpretation of experiences. A qualitative approach allows systematic inquiry to take place in a naturalistic setting (i.e., the family and community). This research study uses a grounded theory methodology which relies heavily on interviews with family members and observations of the child to provide information gained from a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 1998). Ultimately, the research provided an understanding of the coping mechanisms and resilient attributes of the children involved in the study. Using the results gained from the data a proposition was formed. This proposition led to a substantive level theory that offers a hypothesis of how children in these families can access their resilient characteristics. Exploring the phenomenon of resilience using the grounded theory approach allowed research questions to focus on the process or changes over time for children within high-conflict families. It focused on the interactional components of family and community relationships. Specifically, this study was designed to explore what family and community members do to promote resiliency within these children and how the child perceives these actions. In order to describe these actions, the researcher needed to focus on the results of the interviews

with the children and parents as well as interviews with pertinent community members. This resulted in the ability to analyze the mediating actions of both family and community members. As well, this study examined the barriers encountered by children in their attempts to exhibit resilient behavior and how they attempted to accommodate to those barriers. This allowed for a thorough examination of the topic from the child's perspective in an attempt to find a way of describing how the interactions of family members either enhance or inhibit adaptive behavior within these children.

This study focused on children between the ages of nine and twelve years of age. Family Conciliation, an agency that works with separated and divorced families, served as the site to gain access to these families. Using this site, twelve families were recruited to be part of the sample or unit of analysis. Data was collected from families that were separated for a minimum of eighteen months and defined as being in ongoing high conflict through an operational definition discussed further in Chapter Three. Data collection included individual interviews with the parents, children, and other relevant extended family members. As well community members involved with the families were interviewed, a focus group with the parents was completed, and pertinent documents were reviewed. Open, axial and selective coding was utilized as a way of conceptualizing and categorizing data. Through the process of this naturalistic inquiry, a theoretical understanding was gained of the phenomenon of resilience within this developmental stage of the children. This understanding is bracketed within a particular age and stage of development. For example, the patterns or attributes of resilience

observed within this research may change as these children mature and are subject to various life events.

### **Research Limitations**

Inherent in qualitative research is the need to understand individual perceptions and interactions. This requires in-depth interviews with family and community members, all of which require more time than using predetermined questionnaires or scales. Due to time and funding considerations, there were limits to the number of families that could be part of this study. The small sample size in this study restricts the generalizability of its findings, a limitation often associated with qualitative methods. As such it may be difficult to generalize the findings from a small number of research participants to the larger population, even if this population has similar general characteristics. However, the richness of the findings compensates by allowing for a fuller understanding of how these individuals were able to adapt to their family situations. Using a smaller population can also provide a way to begin to develop theory in this area.

Issues with respect to cultural differences needed to be addressed in this study. Various cultures have their own ways of compensating for stresses or changes within their families. In order to address this concern, it was necessary to incorporate questions about cultural practices into the interviews in order to ascertain how culture can play a part in contributing to resilient characteristics. However, cultural differences were difficult to delineate within this study as only three out of the twelve families identified

themselves as being other than Caucasian. Because of the sample size it was difficult to understand if issues of resilience are the same for children of different cultures.

Longitudinal studies have often been used as a way of understanding the phenomenon of resilience. Due to the length of this study, a longitudinal perspective was not possible. However, through in-depth interviews, questions garnered information with respect to the development of resilient behaviour since the separation of the parents. This provided information both about the process of the separation and how the interaction of family members either promoted or hindered resiliency.

Another possible limitation was in acquiring information about the experiences of both parents. Due to the nature of interparental conflict and the availability of the parents, it was not possible to interview both parents from every family. However, the inability to interview both parents often provided a better understanding of the environment of the parental conflict and how this was reflected within the dynamics of the family. For example, if one parent refused to be part of the study, this often provided insight into the type and duration of interparental conflict. It also suggested ways that the conflict had affected the child. In turn this allowed for a better understanding of the contributions and barriers to resilience in these children.

### **Significance of Research**

Families engaged in ongoing conflict provide ongoing challenges to the court system, family law lawyers, family court assessors, family mediators and clinicians that become involved in an attempt to resolve the conflict. In many instances, these systems have been unsuccessful in providing ways to help these families change their level of

conflict or the way they handle their conflict. Chapter Six provides detailed information relating to the results of this study that in turn could be utilized as alternative ways of working with this population.

The significance of this research is two-fold. It allowed for a rich and thick understanding of resilience within this population of children, thereby giving us a better grasp of the interactions within high-conflict families from the children's perspective. This study provided a unique opportunity of hearing the views of the children. They were given a chance to voice their thoughts and ideas about changes in their families. For example, hearing the children's stories and how they coped with the interparental conflict led to a deeper understanding of how they often struggled to find external and internal resources to help support and enhance their resiliency. Through discussions with the parents it became clear that although they attempted to find a resolution to the conflict many were unable to move forward due to unresolved grief and anger. These unresolved feelings often led to feelings of resentment and frustration from one parent towards the other one. The children stated that they were often aware of their parents' feelings and felt the need to find a secure refuge from the intensity of them, which led them to seek out alternative sources of support. If they could find refuge through a strong relationship with a stepparent, grandparent or with their peers, they were much more able to cope with the interparental conflict in their family of origin.

The other significant aspect of this study was in the some of the surprising results gained through the data analysis. The information garnered from this study led to the generation of a theoretical proposition or model built on the understanding of resilience within this population. This new proposition adds to our understanding of the

interactions between family members within this population. By using this new information clinicians and other stakeholders may be able to find alternative ways of working with high-conflict families. The information provides the opportunity to help these families find practical solutions in their quest to protect their children from the ongoing interparental conflict.

The next chapter provides a review of the related literature. It examines the issues pertaining to the interactions and effects of high-conflict families after separation and/or divorce. This includes identifying numerous theoretical models that attempt to incorporate how children's reactions to their parents' conflict are reflected through their behaviour. As the phenomenon of resilience is the core of this research project, the literature review provides an overview of resilience and how researchers have attempted to understand it. This includes suggesting how various theories have integrated resiliency into family functioning.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There has been a great deal of discussion throughout the literature on divorce and its effects on children. However, there is a specific population of children of divorcing parents that is at extreme risk. The children that hear their parents fight both before and after the separation find a way of incorporating this behavior into their understanding of family functioning. In order to understand the implications of interparental conflict, a review of the pertinent literature is necessary.

This literature review has four related components. The first one contains information about separation and divorce with particular emphasis on families in high conflict. Issues that pertain to high-conflict separation and divorce are discussed from the children's perspective. The second component of this chapter discusses the issue of resilience, the primary focus of this study. Embedded within literature on children of separation and divorce is some discussion on their resilience to this life event. However, as there is very little of this information, general ideas about the concept of resilience from children's perspectives are extrapolated from the literature. The third component of this chapter reviews the predominant theoretical approaches with respect to how children interpret interparental conflict. Included in this review is information pertaining to family stress theory, a theory linked to stress and coping. It is a theory that features some ideas used as a starting point in this research. The final component of this chapter attempts to summarize the implications from the literature and discuss the limitations of past research in this area. This allowed for a better understanding of how to integrate new ways of exploring this subject matter.

## **Review of Separation and Divorce Literature**

### ***Impact of Separation and Divorce on Children***

Separation and divorce have become a part of our social structure. Ambert (1998) suggests that 1.2% of married couples in Canada divorce each year. This corresponds to almost one in three Canadian marriages ending in divorce (Frederick & Hamel, 1998). This does not include the dissolution of common law unions or the unknown number of couples who separate, but never file for divorce (Ambert, 1998). Therefore, this data do not adequately reflect the number of marital separations that take place in Canada. Statistics Canada (2003) tells us that there were 70,828 divorces in Canada in 1998. Manitoba had 2,352 marriages that were dissolved in that year. As a way of understanding the phenomenon of divorce, Statistics Canada (2003) estimates that thirty-eight percent of couples will divorce within thirty years of marriage.

While the divorce rate has remained relatively unchanged over the past few years, the phenomenon of repeat divorces has accounted for an increasing proportion of divorces in Canada. For example, in 1973, only 5.4% of married couples that had previously been divorced while thirty years later this proportion has tripled to 16.2% of all divorces. Similarly, the proportion of divorces involving wives who had previously been divorced rose from 5.4% to 15.7% during this three-decade period (<http://www.statcan.ca>). Ambert (1998) maintains that close to forty percent of children will experience their parents' separation or divorce. Children of all ages are affected by their parents' separation. With the phenomenon of repeat divorces, children are exposed to even greater losses due to the fact that most stepparents are no longer involved in the family unit. While the effects of the separation differ relative to the age of the children

and their stage of development, all children have to cope with the changes to the family system after a separation of their parents (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). How well they cope will depend on the parents' abilities to move into their new roles as co-parents.

Over the last two decades there has been a great deal of research completed on the effects of divorce on children. Through this research, it is clear that children suffer in varying degrees due to the separation or divorce of their parents. It has been consistently shown that on average children from divorced families exhibit higher levels of maladjustment than those from intact families. However, the general differences may be small. For example, Amato and Keith (1991) completed a meta-analysis of the 95 studies comparing children from divorced and intact families. Overall they found only marginal differences between the two groups with the largest differences in behaviour problems for the children from divorced families. It is also important to distinguish between short- and long-term effects. Hetherington (1999) notes that adjustment to divorce is a process that takes place over time. She suggests that “restabilization of the family and a new homeostasis in family functioning are usually attained two to three years following divorce” (p. 94). According to Grych and Fincham (1997), most research studies have been cross-sectional but have not specifically examined the length of time that parents have separated. Alternatively, other studies note the time elapsed since the final divorce but not the actual separation of the parents. Therefore, the research does not necessarily describe the short- and long-term effects of separation and divorce.

There have been varying ideas expressed in the existing literature on how well children cope when their parents separate. If divorce is viewed as a developmental family life transition, the crisis surrounding this transition can ease, thereby allowing family members to go forward with their lives. Over the long-term, children's emotional well being need not suffer if parents can maintain positive co-parenting relationships. As well, children do not need to be drawn into any conflict between parents. This concept is not always reflected in the children's lives. As an example, 27% of divorce cases in 2003 in which custody of dependents was granted needed to be arbitrated by a judge through divorce court proceedings (<http://www.statcan.ca>). In the ideal, resolution of any conflict regarding time-sharing or financial issues can occur through discussions by the parents, mediation, or through lawyers. This allows the conflict to be resolved in a timely manner.

Resolution of conflict prevents the children from being caught in the middle of loyalty conflicts between their parents. Much of the literature has treated parental divorce as an isolated incident that affects children only after its occurrence (Sun, 2001). In recent years researchers have begun to look at the idea of parental separation as a process, i.e., how children are affected before and after family dissolution. This has led to a fuller understanding of the process of the separation.

In a meta-analysis of the literature completed by Amato and Keith (1991) three primary perspectives were suggested to account for the effects of divorce on children. They were parental loss, economic deprivation, and family conflict. Parental loss pertains to the handicaps experienced by the child due to the loss of one parent from the household. The economic disadvantage perspective suggests that problems exhibited

by children of divorce are due to economic hardship following family disruption. The family conflict explanation assumes that “divorce affects children primarily because of the conflict that occurs between parents before and during the separation period” (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 38). This is also referred to as the interparental conflict perspective (Jekieliek, 1998).

Through much of the literature, interparental conflict is seen as the variable that provides the most distress for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cummings & Davis, 1994; Jekieliek, 1998; Kline & Johnston, 1991). Hetherington (1999) also suggests that two of the main challenges confronting parents following divorce are minimizing the children's exposure to parental conflict and maintaining a positive parent-child relationship. She maintains that the effects of stressors such as interparental conflict can be mitigated by the quality of parenting.

### ***Continuum of Conflict***

Parental conflict can be viewed on a continuum, with the lowest point being parents that can resolve their differences after a separation with a minimal amount of antagonism. This conflict generally dissipates over a short period of time as parents enter a new type of co-parenting arrangement. The mid-range of this continuum consists of parents that continue to exhibit conflict after the separation through an inability to agree on parenting and financial issues. These issues may be ultimately resolved through divorce mediation or with the help of a court order.

Within the literature there is no specific definition of what high-conflict means for this population. However, one issue is addressed in an indirect fashion. The

literature on separation and divorce suggests that when parents separate there is an immediate period of re-organization. Often this period is characterized by conflict between the parents as they attempt to resolve issues relating to the children and the divorce itself. It has been reported that over two-thirds of couples who experience high conflict during this process need intermediaries to help them in resolving disputes (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Usually after the first or second year, families have adjusted to this transition and the conflict between the parents has lessened. However, there are still parents who continue to be unable to move beyond the conflict. In an attempt to provide an understanding of the scope of this subject, some authors (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston & Roseby 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) refer to high-conflict families as those who are highly entrenched in their conflict. This is estimated to be anywhere between one-fourth and one-third of divorcing couples. Information in the literature also suggests that high-conflict parents are those in ongoing litigation, ongoing conflict, and unable to move forward with their lives. They are involved in a relationship with the other parent that is unhealthy and detrimental to themselves and the children. In addition, the interaction between the parents is often characterized as abusive, distrustful, aggressive, and full of anger.

The highest point on the continuum incorporates the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence occurring in the marital relationship followed by its direct or indirect impact on the ongoing co-parenting relationship suggests high conflict. One of these parents may have been physically harmed during the marriage. As well, one or both of the parents may have inflicted severe emotional abuse on each other during their relationship. After the separation, ongoing conflict continues and includes continued

harassment, physical altercations or negative emotional exchanges. These situations are often about issues pertaining to the children or finances. Therefore, the continuum of interparental conflict ranges from verbal disagreements, to higher intensity and more frequent conflict, and finally, moving to domestic violence. Children are caught in the middle of this conflict in a number of ways. They find refuge in certain behaviours, including the alienation of parents. As well as witnessing the violence between their parents, children may have been victims of that violence themselves.

### ***Effects of Interparental Conflict***

Within the literature there are different ways of understanding the effects of interparental conflict on children. From the perspective of some researchers, parental conflict is a powerful predictor of child adjustment; even more so than the divorce itself or postdivorce conflict (Bay & Braver, 1990; Buehler, Krishnakumar & Stone, 1998; Kline & Johnston, 1991; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). However, Kelly (2000) found that the presence of conflict and verbal disagreement between parents is not in itself a reliable predictor of child adjustment. Rather it is the intensity and frequency of parent conflict, the style of conflict, its manner of resolution, and the presence of buffers ameliorating the effects of high conflict that are the most important predictors of child adjustment. Of interest is research conducted by Morrison and Coiro (1999), which found that children whose high-conflict parents remained together had a larger increase in behaviour problems than their counterparts whose parents separated. This suggests that dealing with the issue of interparental conflict may be more important than all the other changes caused by separation and divorce.

Conflict occurring in the context of divorce can be particularly stressful for children. Grych and Fincham (1997) suggest that conflict between parents post-separation is often related to child-related issues. Children are especially sensitive to conflict between their parents that is related to them (Cummings & Davis, 1994). Children may even blame themselves when the topic of a conflict concerns them (Grych & Fincham, 1993). At the higher end of the continuum of high-conflict, post-separation families, the issue of alignment and alienation of children becomes paramount. Alignments, or strong preferences by the child for one parent over the other, can lead to a continuum of children's behaviours, from a secretly held longing to be with the preferred parent, to visitation refusal (Lampel, 1996). In their study of 80 high-conflict families, Johnston and Campbell (1988) found that between thirty-five percent and forty percent of children between the ages of seven and fourteen years were involved in parental alignment. Continued high-conflict between parents can lead to the alienation of the child from one parent. In their literature review on alienation, Kelly and Johnston (2001) define the alienated child as "one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection and/or fear) towards a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent" (p.254). The alienated child has a distorted view of this parent. It goes beyond feelings of being aligned with one parent. Feelings of alienation appear to be a form of self-preservation on the part of the child. According to Kelly and Johnston (2001), the alienated child is often responding to complex dynamics within a high-conflict custody dispute.

Moving to the extreme end of the continuum of conflict between parents, an examination of the issue of domestic violence is needed. The literature suggests that conflict between parents that takes the form of domestic violence presents a number of serious concerns for children both before and after the separation.

There is a growing recognition that children are negatively affected by exposure to adult domestic violence. For example, researchers have found that child witnesses to adult domestic violence are more likely than children from non-violent households to experience behavioural, emotional, and cognitive problems (Beeman, 2001; Edleson, 1999).

Several theoretical assumptions are commonly agreed upon when considering the effects of family violence on children (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001; Emery, 1999; Grych & Cardonza-Fernades, 2001; Jaffe & Geffner, 1998). Eisikovits and Winstok (2001) summarize the assumptions of most researchers in the field as follows:

- i) Children are not passive receptacles of the effects of interparental violence, but influence and are influenced by such events.
- ii) Parental expectations both frame the boundaries and provide the scripts for content of children's construction of interparental violence.
- iii) The impact of parental expectations and behaviours are mitigated by extrafamilial influences, such as availability of support, significant others, peers, and various organizations in which children take part.
- iv) Children's reality is constructed through a negotiation process, including perceiving, explaining the causes of, and giving meaning to events in general and violent events in particular (p.205).

The above assumptions reflect a starting point when suggesting how children are affected by domestic violence. Intertwined with these factors are issues relating to the parents' separation. For example, Ayoub, Deutsch, and Maraganore (1999) found that the contribution of witnessing domestic violence within the context of a highly conflicted parental relationship magnified the emotional distress of the children. In their research, 50% of children whose parents were involved in custody litigation had also witnessed domestic violence. They concluded that a cluster of relevant factors taken jointly, including the level of marital conflict, violence against a partner or against the children, the parent's mental health, the child's medical condition, and the nature of visitation changes, all contribute significantly to the child's emotional distress.

In her research on abusive parents, Ross (1996) found that there was a high probability of an abusive spouse also abusing his/her children, especially male children. For example, the probability of child abuse by a violent husband increases five percent with one act of marital violence to near certainty with fifty or more acts of marital violence. The predicted probability of child abuse by a violent wife increases five percent with one act of marital violence to thirty percent with fifty or more acts of marital violence. Ayoub, Deutsch and Maraganore (1999) suggest that children who witness domestic violence and experience child maltreatment suffer a powerful cumulative impact from these factors, which results in a steep increase in emotional distress symptoms. Through their research, Johnston and Campbell (1993) found that children's adjustment was quite disturbed when domestic violence was severe, repetitive, and perpetrated by men. Kurz (1996) suggests that too little attention is paid to the problem of violence during the marriage. For example, if violence is the reason

for the separation, violence will likely continue to play a role in the divorce process as couples negotiate the time-sharing arrangements and marital assets. This information suggests that the issue of domestic violence needs to be addressed before the separated parents can even begin to look at the division of assets, custody and time-sharing of the children.

Jaffe and Geffner (1998) maintain that many battered women are put in the position of being advised to promote a relationship between the other parent and the child with a spouse who may be a danger to themselves and the child. Dalton (1999) states the importance of understanding the difference between interparental conflict and domestic abuse. This will allow us to decide the level of danger for ongoing contact between family members. While divorce literature stresses the negative influence of conflict on children, it also suggests that there is a need for a positive co-parenting relationship where the children maintain an ongoing supportive relationship with both parents. This often leaves the family court system with the difficult task of interpreting the best interests of the child. There has been an attempt to address these seemingly diverse positions on this matter through the literature. McGill, Deutsch and Zibbell (1999) suggest that there needs to be a careful assessment of the domestic violence issues, the parenting capacities of the adults and the coping skills of the children. Only then can specific recommendations be made with respect to ongoing contact with both parents. Therefore, from the perspective of the family court practitioner, there is a need to complete a thorough assessment of the family situation in order to help the court understand the family dynamics. Recommendations for the family may include

supervised access between the child and offender as a way of ensuring safety for all family members.

The research on the effects of children experiencing high-conflict suggests that these children may require intervention strategies from outside of the family system to help them deal with the interparental conflict. Indeed, clinical intervention with these children needs to correspond to the current needs expressed in the research. For example, court-based clinicians may need to intervene with high-conflict parents in order to help ameliorate the conflict for the children. This may include supervising access or counselling for family members in an attempt to improve communication.

Children within these families often come to attention of counselors as the children begin to exhibit aggressive behaviors or become increasingly depressed. The school system, through its teachers and counsellors observe the differences in children's reactions to interparental conflict. Research has shown that the children from these families will often have problems academically as well as with their peers (Pedro-Carroll, 1999). As well, they may model their parents by acting out aggressively or becoming withdrawn and depressed. For many children the legacy of prolonged or intense parental fights is high anxiety, confusion, emotional constriction and difficulty in distinguishing their own ideas, needs, and emotions as separate from those of their angry parents (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). These behaviours may need outside intervention if the parents cannot change their own ways of dealing with conflict.

In an attempt to understand the strengths of children within this population, there is a need to review the literature on resilience. Over the past twenty years there has been a shift by practitioners to focus on enhancing strengths instead of pathology.

The field of resilience has attempted to address issues connected to vulnerability and risk. The following section will provide an overview of this subject area.

## **Resilience Literature**

### ***Definition of Resilience***

Within this research study the phenomenon of resilience is the central component. A literature review of resilience gives some background in how it has been defined and described. Ideas relating to resilience in children of separation and divorce have begun to emerge in the literature. How children cope with their parents' separation depends on many factors. For example, interactions with family and community either hinder or support children in adapting to changes in the family. Very little research exists on the resilience of children within families of high-conflict, separated parents.

Antonovsky's (1979) early work on salutogenesis, i.e., the study of the mystery of health, encouraged the medical system to change its focus from the study of pathology to the study of health. This was part of the impetus for other systems, particularly psychology, psychiatry and finally, the field of social work to move towards changing the way in which prevention, alternative health or family strengths were understood. It has also led to the notion of resilience receiving increased attention in the literature over the past twenty years. The historical basis for the concept of invulnerability from harmful influences, often associated with the concept of resilience, has been firmly established throughout the literature. While the concept of resilience is understood in a general sense, ideas associated with this concept are not always clear.

For example, ideas associated with coping, hardiness, adaptation, mastery, adjustment and persistence are also often used to describe resilient behavior.

The idea of resiliency refers to processes that are at work interrupting the path for being at risk for problem behaviors. Resilience is viewed as a positive concept that implies strength, power and hardiness. The concept of resiliency represents an explanation of why some children show successful adaptation despite exposure to threatening situations. Resiliency and vulnerability are often viewed on opposite ends of a continuum. When an adverse life situation occurs, the individual either becomes vulnerable to the situation and is unable to cope with many of the consequences or is not susceptible to the negative impact, thereby exhibiting resilient characteristics.

Resiliency is often discussed in combination with risk factors and protective factors. The literature suggests resilience can result from the interplay between these factors.

### ***Risk Factors***

Risk factors can be described as stressful life events or adverse environmental conditions that increase the vulnerability of individuals (Norman, 2000). Rutter (1990) as well as Margolin, Oliver and Medina (2001) discuss ideas associated with risk indicators and risk mechanisms. Risk indicators are psychological or biological hazards that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes. For example, risk indicators may be the loss of a job or the chronic illness of a parent. Risk mechanisms explain the why and how of individual susceptibility. Rutter (1990) suggests that it is necessary to understand the meaning of risk mechanisms in order to identify resilient behavior. As

an example from this population, marital conflict is considered a risk indicator and the level of marital conflict as well as individual characteristics of the child are risk mechanisms. With interparental conflict, the study of resilience would need to include a thorough understanding of how individual family members have experienced the conflict. This would indicate how the risk factors have influenced perceptions and abilities to overcome adversity. Within the literature, risk indicators and risk factors are often used interchangeably to mean an adverse life event. For example, a risk indicator and risk factor may be described as a job loss or death of a spouse.

### ***Protective Factors***

The opposite of risk factors is seen in the idea of protective factors. Protective factors are described as the presence of particular factors that buffer and protect against risk factors (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1990). Werner (1990) defines resilience and protective factors as the positive counterparts to the constructs of vulnerability and risk factors. She further defines vulnerability “as the individual's susceptibility to a negative outcome and risk factors as biological or psychosocial hazards that increase the likelihood of a negative development outcome” (p. 97). Masten and Garmezy (1985) define resilience as a characteristic of the individual, and protective factors as individual and environmental characteristics that ameliorate or buffer a person's response to risk factors. Protective factors can be both internal and external.

Protective factors have been described in relation to three primary systems in the child's world: family, school, and community (Howard & Johnson, 2000). The

resiliency research consistently identifies mentors outside the family as a buffering factor for children. Greene (2002) suggests three primary characteristics associated with protective factors. They are: “(1) personal disposition, i.e., positive temperament, social responsiveness, ability, and self-esteem; (2) a supportive family milieu, including warmth and cohesion; and (3) an extrafamilial social environment that rewards competence and reinforces belief systems” (p. 34).

Protective variables can exert their beneficial effects in different ways (Freitas & Downey, 1998; Tiet et al. 1998). These authors suggest that distinctions can be drawn between variables that interact with the risk factor to reduce negative outcomes, variables that have a direct effect on the children's adaptation regardless of the risk, and variables that inoculate the child through successful responses to the risk indicator. Rutter (1990) states that variables that interact with a risk factor either intensify or ameliorate the effect of the stressor in the high-risk population but have little or no effect in the low-risk group. Margolin, Oliver and Medina (2001) refer to these variables as the ones that would be moderators as they affect the direction and strength of the association between the risk and adaptation variables. This conceptualization has been referred to as an interactive model, as it describes the relationship between risk and protective factors (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). This model suggests that protective factors only have an effect in combination with risk factors. Therefore, understanding the protective factors is necessary in an attempt to moderate the risk factors.

Specific protective factors can include individual characteristics of the children within this population as well as environmental factors. Examples of individual characteristics are intelligence, easygoing temperament, specific talents, physical

attractiveness, as well as the child's interpretation of the events and ability to respond effectively when confronted with stressful situations (Margolin, Oliver, & Medina, 2001; Rutter, 1990). Examples of environmental characteristics are emotionally supportive parents or other adults, positive sibling relationships, and successful extra-curricular activities (Egeland, Carlson, & Stroufe, 1993; Grych & Fincham, 1997; Margolin, Oliver & Medina, 2001). Werner and Smith (2001) state that more protective factors are needed as the number of risk factors increase. They suggest that the emotional support of alternate caregivers, such as grandparents or siblings gain importance in middle childhood.

Through her review of the literature Norman (2000) categorized resiliency factors as either 'personality related' or 'interpersonally related'. Examples of personality related factors are self-efficacy and empathy. Examples of interpersonally related factors are positive relationships with family and community members.

Rutter (1990) defines a factor as protective if it protects against risk mechanisms. He also suggests that we need to search for developmental and situational mechanisms involved in protective processes as a way of understanding resilience. For example, it is not enough to have social competence. Resilient behavior is seen in applying those skills. This is an important dimension to note when applying resilient behavior to alternative cultures. For example, traits seen as unacceptable in some cultures are seen as necessary to survive in other cultures.

Rutter (1990) suggests that "the concepts of vulnerability and protective mechanisms are more narrowly defined than that of resilience" (p. 184). Resilience is not seen as a fixed characteristic of the individual, but changes over time and

circumstances. In other words, it can be viewed as a process as well as a trait of an individual. For example, children who show resilience in one situation may not show resilience in another situation or at another point in time (Freitas & Downey, 1998). Therefore, we need a further description and clarification of the way in which resilience works with particular populations.

Attempts have been made to describe the concepts of coping from an individual and family perspective as the study of resiliency has emphasized successful coping. Rutter (1983) describes coping as that of individual differences in children's responses to stressful events. "Coping is generally described as children's effortful, intentional, or purposeful physical or mental activities to alter the perceived problem or to alter their own emotional states" (Margolin, Oliver & Medina, 2001, p. 23). This definition is reflected in individual protective factors delineated in the resiliency literature. Margolin, Oliver and Medina (2001) outline two forms of coping by children. They include: "(a) problem-focused coping, which serves to manage or alter the problem through strategies such as intervening directly or generating alternative solutions, and (b) emotion-focused coping, which serves to regulate stressful emotions and includes strategies such as avoidance, distancing, and selective attention" (p. 24). Understanding coping from this perspective allows it to become part of a framework for resilience. For example, individual coping mechanisms could be considered as risk indicators and protective factors. How these coping skills are utilized could be moderated through family interactions or community interventions.

In an attempt to understand the concept of resiliency it is important to note the presence of other systems. For example, protective factors include positive influences

from the community and school systems, i.e., counselors and teachers. Hanson, McLanahan and Thomson (1998) suggest three types of resources or systems that interact together to form protective factors after the divorce process. They include: economic resources such as income, parental resources such as high levels of parental involvement and community resources such as friends, family relations and other avenues of social support.

In the past the concept of risk factors has been viewed as the vulnerability or the barriers to resilient behaviour. Within this study's population risk factors may include lower income or a parent's inability to focus on the child due to employment demands. Alternatively, a barrier to resiliency may be a change in residence due to the separation. The family then finds itself in a new community having to understand the new systems of school, community and peers. Kirby and Fraser (1997) suggest that identifying the common factors that influence resilience for children is necessary both to conducting an ecologically based assessment as well as designing ecologically focused services. Understanding the interplay of risk and protective factors will allow for an understanding of how the systems can provide a balance for individual family members.

Masten (2001) suggests that resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes. For example, as resilience is understood within the context of good outcomes in the face of serious threats to development, it simply needs the appropriate systems in place to allow for individual or family adaptation. This suggests that resilience is not a rare occurrence, rather it occurs with supportive ecological systems in place. Understanding resilience as a normative function allows for an

optimistic outlook as well as considering how systems can be protected, restored, facilitated or nurtured in the lives of children.

### ***Family Resilience***

Another approach to understanding resilience is seen through the work of Walsh (1998, 2002). She has suggested a family resilience framework. The term “family resilience refers to coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit” (Walsh, 1998, p. 14). This framework is derived from a combination of studies on individual and family resilience in conjunction with a strength-based approach to family therapy. This perspective shifts from viewing families as distressed to seeing them as challenged. Walsh (1998) maintains that a life cycle perspective on individual and family development is necessary for an understanding of resilience. Through this lens, she maintains it is possible to understand predictors of adult outcomes. In earlier research, Garvin, Kalter and Hansell (1993) found that good self-worth, i.e., a realistic sense of hope and self-control, family solidarity, and the availability of social support as key factors that promote family resilience.

Within the family resilience model, it is family processes that predict resiliency. As well, several basic principles grounded in systems theory serve as the foundations for a family, i.e., family belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes. This framework provides a way to understand the interactive component of risk and protective factors within the evolution of the family. It also offers clinicians ways of adapting family interventions. For example, clinicians can help families utilize particular strengths and communication patterns. It also suggests a way of positively

working with changes in the family, i.e., separation and divorce. For example, if parents can utilize their strengths to communicate with respect to parenting issues, they may be able to move forward in their new co-parenting roles. However, there are children that show resilient behavior regardless of their family background. This suggests other protective factors are at work enabling these individuals to rebound from adverse life circumstances. The family resiliency model makes it difficult to understand how individual characteristics impact on family resiliency. For example, how does an individual family member's coping skills promote or hinder the family's ability to adapt to the stressful life event.

DeGarmo and Forgatch (1999) use a social interactional perspective to explain differences in children's behavior after family transitions. The social interactional model argues that “the association between contextual risk factors such as divorce and negative outcomes is mediated by parenting practices in all family structure types” (p. 229). This perspective looks for strengths within the social environment as protective factors. For example, a positive relationship between the parent and child at the time of a separation can help negate the difficult changes that the child feels due to the separation. Within this model these researchers are able to use the family transition as a way of exploring changes in family structure and family process. This is a useful way of conceptualizing the interactive effects of families within the phenomena of resilience.

It is important to note that resilient behavior does not always indicate emotional health. In research by Luthar and Ziegler (1991), it was found that adolescents who showed resilient behavior through their academic achievements were more susceptible to stress in other aspects of their functioning. This suggests a need to take a further look

at the costs of resilient behavior. However, studying resiliency and protective factors are a way of understanding the role of positive processes in children when there has been interparental conflict, regardless of the level of conflict.

Emery (1999) found that despite the increased risk, “resilience is the normative psychological outcome of divorce for children, at least as indexed by standard measures of psychological, educational and behavioral problems” (p. 37). The resilience perspective highlights the fact that children confront a number of stressors during the divorce transition, yet the majority is still able to function quite competently. However, Emery (1999) and Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2000) discuss the cost of successful coping. Children will still have feelings of fear of abandonment, grief over various losses, self-blame, hopes for reconciliation, embarrassment, anger at parents, worries about each parent’s well-being, uncertainty about one’s own relationships, and anxiety about ongoing parental conflict.

Emery (1999) suggests that for some children, divorce may promote positive development such as a greater sense of personal responsibility, self-esteem, and more gender-neutral attitudes and aspirations. “Because of increased family demands as well as changes in the family’s authority structure, children from divorced families may have to assume responsibilities at an earlier age than their peers. This may lead to greater self-sufficiency or conversely, feelings of hardship” (p.47). “When coping is viewed from a contextual perspective, emphasis is placed on the specific thoughts and acts that the individual uses to cope with specific contexts, as guided by personal appraisals of situations, especially perceived ability to cope” (Cummings, 1998, p.64). Individual differences also figure prominently, including personal dispositions, family history, age,

and gender. Thus, negative outcomes in children develop over time as a result of person-environment interactions that gradually shape how children respond and react to socio-emotional events and interactions. Therefore, the “product” of marital conflict and violence are specific, maladaptive emotional, social and cognitive response patterns and dispositions. Cummings (1998) suggests that “adjustment problems in children be most informatively understood in terms of coping processes” (p.66). His model posits that children’s families backgrounds of experiences, their own personal characteristics, and the context and stimulus characteristics of anger expressions each influence their stress and coping responses. These can be conceptualized in terms of specific cognitive, emotional, social or physiological responses or, more broadly, as coping strategies over time. As well, these response patterns could contribute to adaptive functioning, or alternatively, to maladaptive outcomes reflecting adjustment.

Several researchers have examined children’s coping strategies in relation to post-divorce parental conflict. Cummings and Davis (1994) state that conflict between parents acts as a stressor for children, which takes its toll on the children’s adjustment. In her research, Radovanovic (1993) hypothesized that parental conflict and children’s coping strategies would be important predictors of children’s post-separation adjustment. She found that greater flexibility in coping and greater use of cognitive coping strategies among children was related to decreased behavioural disturbance.

A review of the resilience literature gives a basic understanding of the interplay between risk and protective factors. As well, coping strategies have been defined as being part of risk and protective factors. The resilience perspective allows for a

common understanding of how protective factors may be utilized with particular populations, i.e., how some protective factors provide against particular problems.

Building on the resilience perspective, theories of how families have adapted to adverse situations have begun to emerge, i.e., the family resilience framework. The family resilience perspective is linked to ideas from family stress theory. The family resilience framework was developed in an attempt to understand how some families manage despite adverse life situations. Family stress theory has attempted to illustrate the interplay and context of stress and coping amongst individual family members. Other theoretical models have attempted to illustrate how children incorporate interparental conflict into their functioning. The literature identifies several of these theoretical perspectives or models. The next section of this chapter will delineate the predominant frameworks and theories that attempt to provide an understanding of how children cope with their parent's ongoing conflict.

### **Predominant Theoretical Approaches**

Within the literature there are differing models that address risk factors associated with children witnessing interparental conflict. In early work in this area Emery (1982) cited four main perspectives through which marital conflict can affect children. They were: (a) modelling of ineffectual conflict resolution techniques, (b) harsh disciplinary techniques leading to increased child behaviour problems, (c) attachment disorders, and (d) emotional security risks for children. Within the current literature, there are particular theoretical models often cited as explanations for how interparental conflict affects children. They include family systems theory, social

learning theory, and the emotional security model, which elaborates on the cognitive contextual framework. As well, the family stress theory delineates ways in which the family can cope with stressful life events.

### *Family Systems Theory*

Within family systems theory there are various concepts that help to explain interactions within families. Family systems theory suggests that marital conflict is a risk factor for children as marital power struggles are accompanied by an intensification of either intimacy, rejection, or both in the parent-child relationship, that are also accompanied by symptomatic behaviours in the child (Margolin, Oliver & Medina, 2001). Often referred to as scapegoating or detouring within the family systems literature (Minuchin, 1974), the parents attempt to distract themselves from their marital problems by focusing on their child's symptoms. The child in turn may intensify problematic behaviours that serve to reunite otherwise disengaged parents.

Another concept from the family systems literature that explains some family interaction with this population is referred to as alignment that is explained earlier. It refers to children taking sides with one parent against the other as a result of the ongoing conflict within the family. For example, one parent may attempt to dissuade the children from ongoing contact with the other parent. This will affect the relationship between the child and both parents, both with the parent against whom they are expected to align, but also their relationship with the parent with whom they are expected to align. As discussed above, alignments, or strong preferences by the child for one parent over the other, can lead to a continuum of children's behaviours, from a

secretly held longing to be with the preferred parent, to visitation refusal (Lampel, 1996). This can lead to further conflict within the family; as well it may be reflected in disputes that involve the legal and judicial system.

Enmeshment is another concept from family systems theory that requires closer examination. Enmeshment refers to tightly interconnected relationships within families. Each person has trouble differentiating his/her own feelings and thoughts from those of other family members (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Within separating families, the child may become increasingly symptomatic over time if the enmeshed parent fails to enforce rules or to hold the child to age-appropriate behaviour. Cox, Paley, and Harter (2001) suggest that marital relations serve as a foundation for emotional processes and their regulation within the family and thus have a role in modifying, ameliorating, or exaggerating the risk associated with other family members. Cummings (1998) notes that positive marital relations and marital satisfactions may support positive functioning in families, fostering children's adaptive development.

Taking concepts from family systems theory broadens our understanding of how children are affected by interparental conflict. It allows us to examine how the interactions of the family directly and indirectly intensify the ways children deal with conflict between their parents.

### ***Social Learning Theory***

Another predominant model is social learning theory. Alfred Bandura is associated with the development of this theory. He attributes problematic behaviour to observational learning, reinforced performance of the behaviour within a social context,

and biological factors that influence what individuals learn and what they can perform. He describes how patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience by observing the behavior of others. He states that “human functioning relies on three regulatory systems. They include antecedent inducements, response feedback influences, and cognitive processes that guide and regulate action” (Bandura, 1973, p. 44). Using human aggression as an example, he states that it is a product of stimulus, reinforcement, and cognitive control. These functions are interrelated.

Stimulus control refers to how an individual can anticipate the probable consequences of different events and then regulate his/her behavior accordingly. The probable consequences are understood through verbal and non-verbal communications, or the actions of others.

Reinforcement control relies on feedback influences, mainly in the form of reinforcing consequences. Responses that cause unrewarding or punishing effects tend to be discarded, whereas those that produce rewarding outcomes are retained and strengthened (Bandura, 1973). Reinforcement can occur through vicarious means, such as observing the experiences of others. It can also work through self-reinforcement, which involves individuals regulating their own behavior by self-evaluative and other self-produced consequences (Bandura, 1973). Together, these three types of reinforcement can produce powerful influences on human behavior.

Bandura (1973) notes that human behavior can not be explained fully by external inducements and response consequences. He states that an individual’s cognitive capacities tremendously increase the information one can derive from their experiences. Transitory external events are coded and stored in symbolic form for

memory representation. This allows observed patterns of behavior to be reinstated at a later time through visualization or discussion. Bandura's social learning theory of aggression is as follows:

it adopts the position that an individual is endowed with neurophysiological mechanisms that enable him/her to behave aggressively. However, the activation of these mechanisms depends on appropriate stimulation and is subject to cortical control. Therefore, the specific forms that aggressive behavior takes, the frequency with which it is expressed, the situations in which it is displayed, and the specific targets selected for attack are largely determined by social experience. (Bandura, 1973, p.28)

Within the context of interparental conflict, children learn aggressive behaviours from the observation of their parents' aggressive behaviour. The social learning component of conceptualization presupposes that children develop similar ways of handling stressful situations by more closely identifying with and modelling the same-sex parents' ways of coping with marital conflict (Davis & Lindsay, 2001). Cummings (1998) suggests that learning, negative reinforcement, and modelling may be factors in the common impact of marital and parent-child subsystems of children. For example, children may learn behavioural and cognitive styles for coping with everyday events both from observing their parents in interparental situations and from interacting with their parents. Camara and Resnick (1988) describe a number of studies indicating that openly hostile conflict behaviours between parents is related to aggression, non-compliance, and acting-out behaviours of children. Simons et al. (1999) suggest that children model the behaviours of their parents. In their study on adjustment problems among children of divorce, they found that children experiencing high levels of parental conflict embraced the deviant values and behaviours displayed by their parents. Amato (1993) suggests that parents modelling verbal or physical aggression may indirectly

teach their children that fighting is an appropriate method for dealing with disagreements. Hanson and McLanahan (1996) reiterate this perspective in their research. They propose that the social learning perspective may explain the parental conflict/child adjustment relationship. They state that “children acquire the same behavioural strategies used by their parents during conflict episodes by imitating parental conduct” (p. 142). Kline and Johnston (1991) also suggest that children learn how to deal with conflict from their parents. For example, disputing parents may model avoidance strategies of conflict resolution through which children learn to withdraw from angry situations and turn their anger inward.

Modeling, as understood through social learning theory, may also provide a way to understand how children can reject their parents as models. In an effort to reject their parents way of resolving conflict they may also reject other positive parental behaviour (Cox, Paley & Harter, 2001). This may cause children to seek out other community, peer, or family members and look towards them for guidance.

Social learning theory allows for an understanding of the reasons that children react to interparental hostility with negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and distress. Through the concepts of antecedent inducements, response feedback influences, and cognitive processes, the child learns how to anticipate and understand parental conflict. This understanding can lead the child to model his/her parent’s behaviour either directly or indirectly. It can also lead them to take sides in the parental conflict or attribute blame for conflict between parents to themselves.

Social learning theory can provide some answers to children’s behaviour in this special population. However, it does not explain how other factors influence a child’s

adjustment to divorce and ongoing parental conflict. For example, issues such as diminished parental capacity, restricted financial availability, change in schools, loss of neighbourhood friends, and coping strategies, are not considered within social learning theory. Although social learning theory has causative and predictive value, it does not account fully for the differences among children's individual reactions to interparental conflict.

### ***Cognitive-Contextual Framework***

The cognitive-contextual framework originally developed by Grych and Fincham (1990) is a unique way of understanding the relationship between interparental conflict and child adjustment. Grych and Fincham (1990) propose a model in which children's cognitive perceptions of marital conflict mediate its impact on their behaviour. The type of marital conflict and the age-related cognitive development of the child influence these perceptions. As stated by Crokenberg and Langrock (2001, p. 129), in Grych and Fincham's original model, "affect is the result of cognitive processing, but also influences attributions, memory, contemplation of coping strategies in relation to marital conflict, and hence, behaviour".

As a way of adding to the cognitive-contextual framework, the idea of emotion was given a more pivotal role. Grych and Cardoza-Fernandes (2001) state that "cognition and affect are assumed to have a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in the appraisal process of children's attempt to understand interparental conflict. The appraisals that children make in a given situation are assumed to be a function of the way that the conflict is expressed. Examples include emotional intensity, resolution,

and contextual factors, such as children's prior exposure to conflict and the quality of parent-child relations "(p. 160).

### *Emotional Security Model*

The emotional security model moves further into elaborating how emotion is the dominant concept in understanding how children incorporate interparental conflict. Cummings and Davis (1994) and Cummings (1998) discuss the implications of marital conflict on the children's emotional security through the emotional security model. This model suggests that children feel their emotional security is most threatened by their parents' conflict. When children feel emotionally insecure it undermines their ability to cope and promotes emotional and behavioural dysregulation in response to everyday stresses (Cummings & Davis, 1994). The emotional security model also builds on attachment theory. Contexts of marital conflict are evaluated by children in terms of their emotional security implications for the child and family, and these appraisals, in turn, serve to motivate and regulate children's emotional regulation, regulation of exposure to marital conflict, and internal representations of marital relations (Cummings, 1998). For example, if separating parents argue about the children, the children appraise this issue as having a direct impact on their emotional security, thereby having an effect on their emotional regulation. This theory suggests that children understand if marital conflict has a destructive or constructive effect on personal and family functioning through previous experience. The theory focuses on the emotional components of the conflict and how the emotional security of children is threatened due to the conflict. For example, children may attempt to enhance their

emotional security by mediating or distracting from the marital conflict (Jenkins, Smith & Graham, 1989). This could be in the form of attempting to distract parents from their conflict.

Grych and Fincham (1990) have described the cognitive-contextual framework as a way to understand how interparental conflict affects children. The underlying premise in this model suggests the meaning of the interparental conflict for children is critical for determining its effects. This perspective is consistent with the position of stress and coping theorists who have posited that how an individual evaluates events is related to the understanding of the impact of that event (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). For example, researchers have found that poorer adjustment is found in children who report higher awareness of interparental conflict, blame themselves or their parents, and perceive higher levels of threat and less resolution (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Both the cognitive-contextual framework and the emotional security model provide a way to understand how children incorporate interparental conflict into their understanding of the world. For example, past or repeated experience with interparental conflict increases children's sensitivity to future conflict and their abilities to cope with it. Repeated exposure to the conflict leads to a variety of maladaptive behaviours. Both these theories provide us with a model that could explain why children with repeated exposure to interparental conflict could be threatened or distressed when faced with new instances of conflict.

## *Family Stress Theory*

Family stress theory can provide some insight into how families adapt to changes within their structure. It provides a framework for understanding how families can adapt or respond to events or challenges. It also offers way to begin to put together ideas related to family adaptation and family strengths or resilience. Researchers have used this theory as a way of understanding differences in how family members adapt to change.

The foundation for this theory lies in Hill's (1949) classic research on war-induced separation and reunion. Hill's ABC-X formulation is the basis for family stress theory (McKenry & Price, 1994). A synopsis of family stress theory provided by Burr (1993) follows: 'A' (the provoking or stressor event) interacts with 'B' (the family's resources or strength), which interacts with 'C' (the definition or meaning attached to the event by the family), which produces 'X' (stress or crisis). X can be viewed as the amount of disorganization or incapacity experienced by family members. The stress (X) is not seen as inherent in the event, but as a function of the response of the family members to the stressor (A).

Coping is seen as an integral part of family stress theory. Coping includes both cognitive and behavioural strategies. Different ways of coping suggest ways of alleviating the stressful life event. Family coping has been conceptualized in terms of a transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Included in this model is a typology of coping strategies for regulating emotional distress. They are: direct action, (e.g. acquiring resources, learning new skills) and intrapsychic, the cognitive processes designed to regulate emotion (e.g. reframing the problem). Another strategy is an

inhibition of action, one that refers to finding ways to prevent, contain, or limit action impulses or behaviours. Coping interacts with both B (family resources) and C (the understanding of the stressor). Other researchers have included seeking out social support as another coping strategy (Curry & Russ, 1985; Wertlieb et al., 1987). Coping represents what the individual or family attempts to do to manage the stressor (McKenry & Price, 1994).

McCubbin and Patterson (1982) expanded Hill's (1949) ABC-X Model by adding postcrisis/poststress factors to explain how families achieve a satisfactory adaptation to stress or crisis. This was entitled the 'Double ABC-X Model'. The Double A factor brought in the idea of how the family must deal with the unresolved aspects of the initial stressor event, the changes and events that occur regardless of the initial stressor, and the consequences of the family's efforts to cope with the hardships of the situation. The Double B factor relates to the resources available to the family and the coping resources that are strengthened or developed in response to the stress or crisis situation. The Double C factor relates to the perception of the initial stressor event and the perception of the stress or crisis. The family's postcrisis/poststress perceptions involve religious beliefs, and attempting to redefine or reframe the situation. The Double X factor includes the original family crisis/stress response and subsequent adaptation. In addition a sense of coherence was added to this model. Building on Anotovsky's (1979) work, a family's sense of coherence was defined as "the family's ability to balance control and trust, i.e., knowing when to take charge and when to trust in or believe in the authority and/or power of others" (Patterson & Garwick, 1998).

Greeff and Van Der Merwe (2004) constructed a study examining the level of family coherence in terms of the internal and external environment. They defined family coherence as “an orientation among family members that internal and external stimuli are structured and predictable, that resistance resources are available for handling the stimuli, and that life’s challenges are meaningful”(p. 66). Ninety-eight families who had been recently divorced were used as the sample for this study. The results indicated that the availability of internal family supports, extended family, peers, religion, open communication amongst family members as well as work and financial security were factors promoting resilience in these families.

Instead of adding the Double factors, Boss (2002) advocates building on Hill’s original ABC-X model by adding a contextual approach. This includes both external and internal contexts. External contexts include dimensions that the family can not control. “Examples are loss of a job, divorce, or inflation. Internal contexts are those that the family can control. These include: addictions, violence, or normative developmental events that are expected to occur during the life cycle, i.e., puberty, aging, or retirement” (p.51). Understanding the context allows both the family and the practitioner to assess the context of the stressor. The context may help identify how individuals within the family will cope with the event, as well as what resources may be needed. Understanding the family’s meaning or perception of the stressful event is of utmost importance. This includes “the context of a family’s culture, history, economics, developmental and genetic make-up, including race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical constitution” (Boss, 2002, p. 51). Practitioners need to highlight the importance of perception and meaning in determining how and why

families respond as they do. This allows the practitioner to ascertain why some families view particular events as a crisis while other families do not see the same event as stressful.

The Double ABC-X model was used as the underlying theory in the development of the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model. This model emphasizes adaptation as the central outcome of the stress process (Patterson & Garwick, 1998). Through qualitative research this model has examined how families adapt to stressful situations. How families adapt to crisis depends on what meaning they attach to it within the context of their family life.

Lee (1997) uses family stress theory as a background to construct a transactional model of post-divorce interparental conflict and children's behavioural adjustment. The model looks at how the familial processes, (e.g. parent-child relationship, children's contact with both parents) interact with children's emotional and coping strategies (e.g. emotional regulation strategies and emotional experiences). The variables of the children's socio-economic status, age and gender are also included in this model. Lee (1997) suggests that post-divorce interparental conflict will have both direct and indirect effects on children's behavioural adjustment. Using this model, research was completed by Lee on a sample of 58 separated families from the Greater Toronto area. Results of this research indicate that the influence of interparental conflict on children's adjustment was moderated by the amount of children's contact with both parents, as well as children's self-moderating emotional processes. Children who had consistent, frequent contact with both parents demonstrated better behavioural adjustment.

The results of this research would suggest that the moderating effects of parental support would promote adaptive responses in children even with the ongoing stressor of parental conflict. As well, the children's own coping strategies of emotional self-regulation were found to benefit their adaptation to the ongoing parental conflict.

### **Implications of Literature Review**

Some variables which appear to explain differences in children's post-divorce adjustment include: age at the time of divorce, gender, support networks, the relationship between the primary parent and child, changes in the standard of living, parental adjustment after the divorce, a continuing relationship with the non-residential parent, and interparental conflict (Lengua, Wolchik, & Braver 1995). Shaw and Emery (1987) suggest that the accumulation of several concurrent stressors is associated with children's behaviour disorders. Through their research, they found that parental conflict was still highly associated with children's adjustment even when the influences of other post-divorce stressors were taken into account.

Cummings and Davies (1994) propose that research on how children cope with parental conflict is not reflected in traditional psychological theories. Many traditional psychological theories do not offer an explanation for the reasons children react to parental conflict. Traditional theories usually focus on the individual, or the dyad, not on the triadic processes of the family. For example, social learning theory focuses on the reasons that children respond to interparental hostility, through modelling of parental behaviour. The cognitive- contextual model and the emotional security model provide information on how and why children are distressed by ongoing interparental

conflict. Much of the past research has focused on the connections between marital discord and children's behaviour problems. This is evident from the cognitive-contextual framework and the emotional security model. These models attempt to show how cognitive processing and emotional security play a pivotal role in assessing their parent's conflict. It also shows how children can utilize protective factors in order to distance themselves from the conflict. Coping strategies are recognized through a cognitive or emotional understanding of the conflict. This model does not suggest how individual differences in children change how they cope, nor does it address how family or community interactions might moderate the assimilation of interparental conflict. It also focuses more on the problems than on the strengths of the children.

The social learning model, the cognitive-contextual model and the emotional security model provides us with ways to understand the linkages between interparental conflict and how children react to it. However, they focus on the pathology or the maladaptive behaviours. They don't suggest how children can adapt to adverse situations, nor do they address the issue of resiliency.

Examining interparental conflict through specific components of family systems theory gives us information of how interparental conflict can impact on a subsystem. Using some components of family systems theory, i.e., alignment and enmeshment, permits some understanding of how these issues can be reflected within the family interactions. It is important to understand family systems theory when researching the concept of resiliency, as risk and protective factors are derived from various systems and contexts. However, inherent in family systems theory is the concept of universality, as family development theorists assume that all families develop in the same way. This

idea leads to making assumptions of how families interact and adapt to changes in structure. In order to understand differences in how families react to specific changes, further examination is needed.

Family stress theory has been developed as a framework for understanding how some families manage to move forward in the face of adversity. It incorporates concepts from family systems theory. Key components of family stress theory provide ways to mobilize families and practitioners towards changing stress levels. Therefore, it is a useful tool for practitioners as it provides a framework for assessments. Parts of these assessments involve understanding the interaction between the context of the family stress and how family members adapt to that particular stressful event.

Family stress theory can provide a way of understanding how a family reorganizes and adapts after a separation/divorce. It can explain differences in family coping, and adaptation responses. Through family stress theory, it is possible to look at how family members perceive and cope with the stressor or crisis of the separation. This theory focuses on how the family as a whole engages in active processes to maintain its capabilities and arrive at a level of family adjustment or adaptation. The reorganization of the family is affected both by the individual member's level of coping, and how the family restructures itself. It is also possible to understand how the individual's coping strategy impacts on the family structure and family's adaptive abilities. For example after a separation, one parent may not be able to adapt to the new family structure. This will have an impact on how the family as a whole reorganizes and adapts to the changes due to the separation.

A key component of this theory encourages family members to seek support both from within the family system and from external sources. Cognitive factors, which are related to the concept of coherence, have been an integral part of most, if not all, family stress theories that have been used to explain family response to stressful life events. Family coherence involves shared values, loyalty, caring, trust and respect of each other. It expresses the family's shared feelings of confidence that an event or crisis can be managed. It can be understood in terms of a resistance to stressful life events. Antonovsky and Sourani (1988) found that families with a strong sense of coherence adapt more easily to change and are able to attain a higher level of reorganization after a crisis. Family coherence allows a family to view a crisis as meaningful and manageable. "Family identity is seen as a central aspect of this coherence" (Patterson & Garwick, 1998, p. 76). Therefore, how a family defines itself is reflected in both its structure and its functioning. Boss (1988) suggests that removing boundary ambiguity is an important component to helping the family identify themselves. Considering high-conflict families within this framework allows us to understand the importance of restructuring after the separation and how this is tied into a sense of coherence. When this transition is disrupted through ongoing conflict, family members may need help to move towards a new identity. Therefore, interventions that empower individual family members to move towards the goal of family adaptation would be useful with this population.

This study searched for family member strengths and capabilities, including a sense of coherence that allowed them to move towards a restructuring of their family in the face of ongoing interparental conflict. It also searched for family resources that

buffered the family from the disabling effects of interparental conflict, thereby promoting adaptation.

Family stress theory gives us a way of understanding ideas connected to coping and family adaptation, with particular emphasis placed on the context. It offers a way to understand family interactions, incorporating key concepts from family systems theory. It offers a way to conceptualize family strengths and adaptive capabilities. Ideas related to family resilience can be used to understand how protective factors work for children. It also offers way of understanding how families can recover from a period of significant disequilibrium. For example, this theory allows us to use the stress of separation and divorce of high-conflict families as a context in which to examine meaning of reactions by family members. If we look at the context of the stress as being the separation within a high-conflict family, we can begin to ask questions about how family members view the stressful event. We could also use the context of high-conflict families as the stressor, particularly examining the severity of this stressor and how much of a threat it poses to the family's hardiness or stability. Building upon these ideas, this study attempted to understand how children adapt despite ongoing parental conflict. Family stress theory provides a way to conceptualize the barriers that inhibit adaptation or resilience, another question that this study attempted to answer. As well, using ideas from this theory allowed for the examination of how much of demand this stressor, i.e., ongoing interparental conflict, places on the family's resources and capabilities.

While this theory is useful for understanding the integration of family resilience, it does not differentiate between individual coping and family coping. For example, is

family coping simply the collective coping of individual family members? Or do individual family members cope despite the combined interactions of family members? Thus, family stress theory gives us only a starting point, a way to conceptualize coping abilities and resilient behaviour within families. It helps to fit the concept of resilient family behaviour, i.e., coping and adaptation strategies within the context of an adverse life event.

In an attempt to understand family stress theory in the context of ongoing interparental conflict, other issues need to be considered. For example, to understand resilience using this theoretical model, there is a need to define and operationalize protective factors, thereby being able to examine how children use them in the face of ongoing parental conflict. As well, with this population, it is often difficult to recognize parental competence as the ongoing conflict between the parents diminishes parental capacity. Therefore, defining family adaptational outcomes is a difficult task.

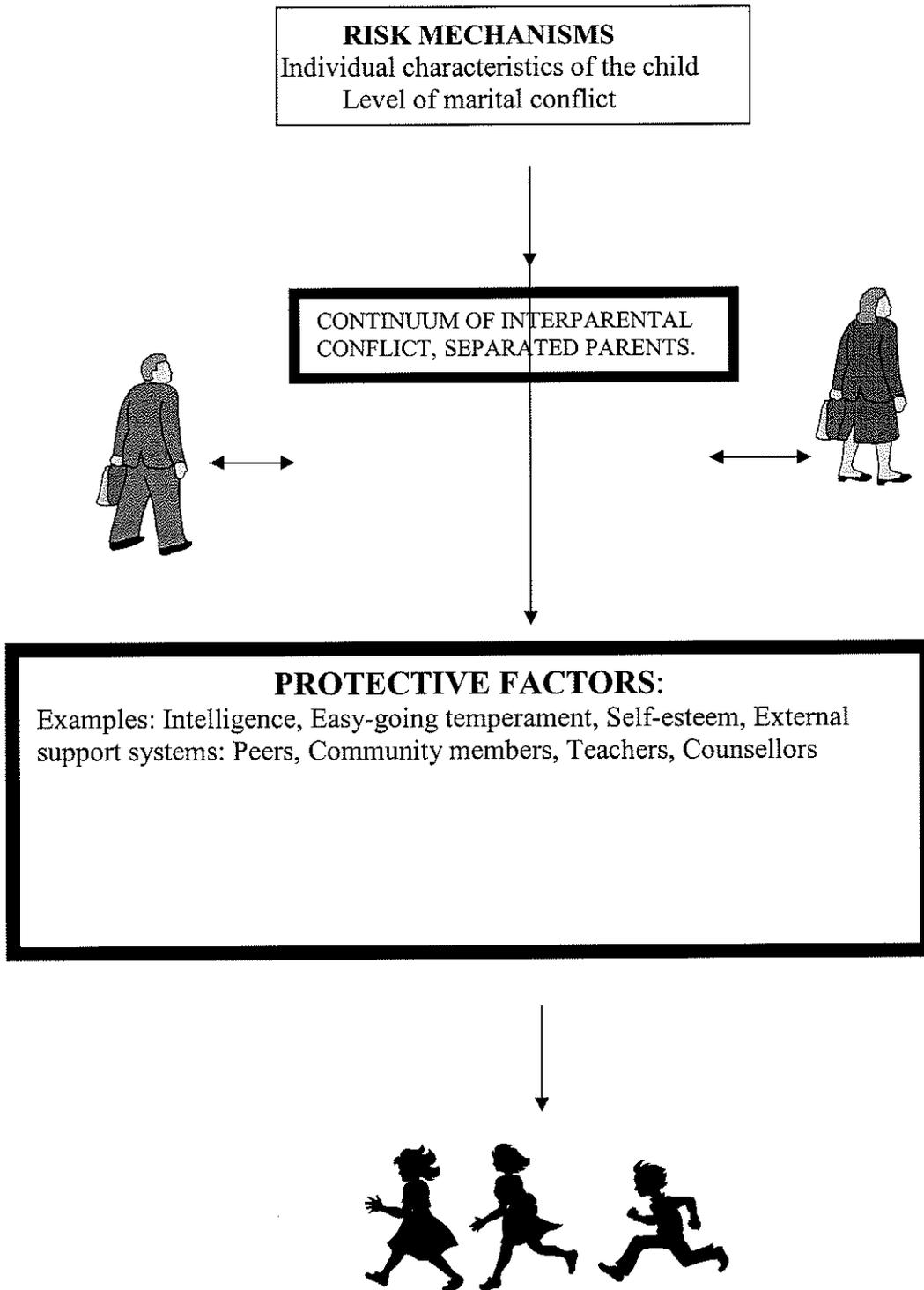
Family stress theory offers a hypothesis, a way of understanding the context of separation and how family members can cope with that particular stressor. This is important information for a beginning to this research. However, the purpose of this research is to understand and find patterns in how children cope and utilize resilient behaviour in the face of ongoing interparental conflict. Therefore, a fuller description of their perceptions and the impact of family interactions provided us with information to build a theoretical model. Ideas gained from family stress theory were used to delineate part of the grounded theory in this research, i.e., family adaptation. However, the focus of this research was on children's resilient attributes and how they are impacted by interparental conflict.

Through the discussion in this chapter it is evident that the concept of resiliency has been used in various ways. Researchers have attempted to find a way to operationalize it in order to study its implications for both the individual and the family. Ideas associated with vulnerability, risk and protective factors as well as risk mechanisms have been discussed as a way of understanding this concept. Concepts associated with resiliency are not always clear. Therefore, it is important to clarify the definition of resiliency in order to study it. For the purpose of this study resiliency is understood as an individual being able to exhibit adaptive characteristics in the face of an adverse life situation, e.g., ongoing parental conflict. Resiliency is seen as an outcome, not a process. As suggested in the literature, using protective factors to guard against risk factors can allow the individual to access resilient characteristics.

The interactions of family members were examined in this study as a way of attempting to understand how children utilized resilient characteristics. As a way of conceptualizing the research for this study, Figure 1 denotes potential family interaction and how that contributes to resilience. Interparental conflict is noted as a key mechanism. The overall inquiry in this study explored the essence of resilience within the context of children situated in high-conflict, separated or divorced families and the lens used to understand this phenomenon was the interaction of family and community members. The literature suggests that using protective factors to counteract risk factors allows children to cope or adapt with a crisis or life changing event. This study explored how various protective factors delineated in the literature led to children being able to utilize resilient attributes. The idea of the 'protective factors' acting as a wall against the risk mechanisms that included the individual characteristics of the child as well as the

risk indicators consisting of the level of the interparental conflict is portrayed in Figure I on page 59. The protective factors as indicators of potential resilient attributes were a starting point to this research. Utilizing these concepts allowed for the study of the interaction between family members in the context of ongoing interparental conflict.

**Figure I - Protective Factors for Children**



The next chapter will describe the design and methodology of this research project. It will delineate the epistemology inherent in the research and provide an explanation of the method of social inquiry. Issues related to data collection, data analysis and ethics are included.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the concepts and design of the research study. It begins with describing the research approach and rationale. Included in the description is an explanation of the epistemological approach that provides the framework to the methodology of grounded theory used in the study.

In order to study this population, it was necessary to clearly delineate ideas associated with high-conflict parents. As well, there was a need to have an operational definition of resilience as this issue is central to the study. Both of these concepts are discussed and described in order to ascertain as precise a definition as possible.

The later part of this chapter describes the various data collection and management that took place over the course of the study. This included sampling procedures, recruitment of research participants, data-gathering methods, and finally recording, analyzing and managing the data. Barriers to the recruitment of families are noted, as these barriers became a key challenge to completing the study. As well, ideas associated with the trustworthiness and authenticities of the study are discussed, as this is an essential requirement in using a qualitative methodology. Finally, ethical and political considerations are delineated. The ethical issues needed particular attention as children were part of the study. It was important that they understand their rights as well as their responsibilities if they were to be part of the study.

## **Research Approach and Rationale**

This research study explored the concept of resiliency within children from high-conflict separated or divorced families. More specifically, the study focused on three main questions. The first question examined how family and community interactions promote resilient behaviours in children within this population. Secondly, this study attempted to understand both how the children perceive their parents ongoing conflict and how they understand the mediating attempts of both family and community members. The third question was designed to identify barriers to resiliency as experienced by these children and how they attempted to overcome these barriers.

In order to understand children's ideas and definitions of the essence of resilience, it is important to understand their perspectives on the issue. One way of incorporating this approach is to utilize an epistemological approach that integrates a social constructionist framework.

Using a social constructionist framework (Gergen, 1995), this study attempted to understand the processes by which these children explain and define themselves and their world. Social constructionism “references knowledge neither in the observed nor the observer, but rather in the place between the two, in the social arena among interpreting subjects” (Pare, 1995, p. 5). “Social construction theory sees meaning as a fluid process of constantly changing narratives that are socially derived and exist in language” (Slovik & Griffith, 1992, p. 232). It emphasizes social interaction as a basis for creating meaning. Social constructionism uses “the intersubjective influence of language and culture, as well as the hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation” (Pare, 1995, p.5). If our experience is regarded as the basis of meaning, discussing this

experience through our language gives us a way of understanding the meaning of the experience. Therefore, using the ideas from social constructionism allowed the researcher a way to move towards a different understanding of how the families interpret issues. "People consider and reconsider reality through their conceptions of and experiences with it. It is not discovered; rather, it is created and recreated" (Laird, 1995, p. 152). "Realities are socially constructed, constituted through language and organized and maintained through narrative" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 22). In other words, realities are organized and maintained through stories. These stories represent how people know themselves and their worlds. Within this study the stories told by the children represented their ideas of resilience and how they have managed to adapt to the ongoing parental conflict. As well, the parents conveyed ideas and insights through their stories about the relationship between the two parents and how this impacted on the family.

Social constructionism provided the broad framework for this study, whereas qualitative methods reflected the approach to design and data collection. Social constructs can be measured only by understanding context and this is inconsistent with a quantitative approach. Within this study, a qualitative method of social inquiry allowed the researcher to ask questions, observe, and permit children to be part of the process by hearing their stories. In other words, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to delve into the complexities of this phenomenon.

Grounded theory is the particular methodology used in this study. Grounded theory is a method of social inquiry associated with a qualitative approach to research. It is an inductive form of research. The inductive process utilizes generalized

knowledge that is derived from specific observations of phenomena from the field. In turn, this can be used to build theory. For example, grounded theorists aim to create theoretical categories from collected data and then analyze relationships between key categories (Charmaz, 1990). Indeed, the main purpose of using a grounded theory approach is to develop theory through understanding concepts that are related by means of statements of relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A grounded theory approach to research allows the researcher to take general knowledge and move towards developing theory grounded in data in the field.

Using the concepts from grounded theory, this study starts from an understanding of the experience of the research participants, i.e., how they construct their worlds. The data analysis stage focused on finding recurrent themes or issues in the data, and finally into developing or refining a theory about the phenomenon.

In general, research in resilience has concentrated on risk mechanisms and protective factors. Researchers like Rutter (1984) and Werner and Smith (1989) undertook long-term, prospective research studies. They studied how people overcame adversity over many years whereas other research has focused on the interaction between parental conflict and children's coping strategies (Cummings & Davis, 1994; Emery, 1999; Radovanic, 1993). However, this research has concentrated on children's reactions to the interparental conflict and has not looked at their resilient attributes. There is also confusion in the current literature on differences between the meaning of coping strategies and resilience. These terms are often used interchangeably. While research has begun to consider family resilience as a way of understanding successful adaptation of individuals within the family, it has not focused on high-conflict families.

As well, research in family stress has been conducted through large-scale surveys and standardized instruments (Gilgun, 1999). It is difficult to find research that has examined how family interaction has promoted particular protective factors within the context of high-conflict, separated families. In order to understand both risk mechanisms and protective factors from an individual and family perspective, we need to look more closely at how the family interacts within this context.

While there has been some research completed on childhood resilience, it has not focused on this population. As a way to complement the research on childhood resilience this study focused on the child within a high-conflict family. The child was the main focus of the study because of the importance of understanding the child's perspectives on conflict within the family context. For example, if children have different understandings from their parents of what they need due to witnessing conflict then the success of interventions designed to promote their resilient characteristics is likely to be compromised if one models intervention only on the parents' perspective.

Within this study family interaction was also used as a way of understanding the meaning of the child's behaviour. As a way of gaining an understanding of the family interaction, questions were asked of the parents. Examples of these questions are how the child interacted with siblings, stepparents or other members of a newly blended family. Other questions focused on the interaction between the parent and child and how the parent assisted the child in his/her adaptation to the separation.

In order to ensure that policies and programs are properly developed, it is important to understand the way family members understand the concept of resilience. Questions were asked of both the children and parents in order to gain ideas about the

child's resilience and coping abilities. For example, the children were asked about peer and community resources and if these resources helped them to cope. Parents were also asked how their child coped with the ongoing conflict in the family. This allowed for the study to focus on the transactional assessment of family stress and resilience with particular emphasis on resilient characteristics of the children.

With the exception of work done by Rutter and his associates, the bulk of the literature about childhood risk and resilience comes from the United States (Dryden, Johnson & Howard, 1999). There is a dearth of research completed in Canada on this subject. Without research completed in Canada, policymakers are left to make decisions based on information gained from other countries.

The literature review identified a number of possible theories to explain the impact of interparental conflict on children. As well, in the resiliency and coping literature, family resilience and family stress theory have been used to increase our understanding of how families interact and adapt to separation and divorce. However, there are gaps in our current knowledge of how to connect the ideas of resiliency with high conflict families experiencing separation and divorce. The integration of knowledge from the current research on separated or divorced high-conflict families and a better understanding of the strengths of these children that incorporate the resiliency perspective was a targeted outcome with this study. For example, using information from family stress theory helped to understand ideas associated with coping within the context of high-conflict families. New information from this study suggested how children use protective factors to enhance their resiliency within the context of ongoing parental conflict. New issues connected with risk factors and protective factors

emerged from the data analysis. The results from the analysis enabled the researcher to link ideas from existing theories with new thoughts related to how children cope with ongoing interparental conflict.

Within the grounded theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) there are three basic elements. They are referred to as concepts, categories and propositions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), it is from the conceptualization of the data, not the actual data per se, that theory is developed. Within this study the research considered the interactions of family members in the context of high-conflict separated parents. Data gained from describing these interactions was used as a background to explore the phenomenon of resilience within the children of these families. From this background, specific categories related to protective factors emerged. For example, ideas associated with the external support systems of the children emerged as a category. Part of this analysis included discovering the relationships amongst and then between the categories. For example, included in the category of 'post-separation changes' were ideas associated with the differences in communication as well as how the parents' coped with the separation. The relationships defined within this category allowed for a thorough examination of the issues and how they then fit with other categories. Grounded theory methodology allows for the development of specific relationships between categories as a way to substantiate an emerging hypothesis from the data. The final phase of the research analysis consisted of constructing propositions about the interactions of family members and how this relates to the phenomenon of resilience.

## **Operational Definitions**

The following explanations offer operational definitions of two critical aspects of this study. Included in these descriptions are the criteria used to form the operational definitions of the continuum of high-conflict and resilience.

### ***Operational Definition of the Continuum of High-Conflict***

This study examined separated or divorced high-conflict families. In order to obtain an appropriate sample for the research, criteria to define high-conflict families was needed. In an effort to establish a definition, information with respect to this issue was reviewed from the pertinent literature. Parents who separate can experience very little conflict to a high level of conflict. Depending on the issues needing resolution and their style of conflict management, they could be conceptualized as being on a general continuum of conflict. The lowest level of the continuum would be comprised of those parents who were able resolve the post-separation issues without any outside help. Moving towards the middle of this continuum are those parents who need assistance in resolving their issues. This assistance could be obtained through the process of mediation or through their lawyers and the judiciary. The higher level of this continuum has several gradations. For the purpose of this study, this higher level is described as having a low, mid and high level at this highest range of conflict. Parents who are unable to resolve the post-separation conflict are situated in this higher level on the continuum of conflict. They are referred to as high-conflict families. For the purpose of this study, high-conflict families were defined as those who were unable to resolve their disputes regarding the children within eighteen months following the parental

separation. This definition addresses both the duration and level of conflict. For example, this definition applies to parents who continue to experience conflict after eighteen months even with attempts to resolve their separation or divorce issues, either through the judicial system by re-litigating past issues or through other forms of conflict resolution. With regard to the level of the conflict, high-conflict parents may continue to have verbal arguments, belittle each other, or verbally, physically or sexually abuse each other. These behaviours may or may not take place in front of the children.

As noted earlier, high conflict, as experienced within families, can be conceptualized as a continuum of interparental hostility. For the purpose of this study, parents included in this continuum were in various levels of conflict for anywhere between eighteen months to upwards of ten years. The low-level of high-conflict included parents who after eighteen months continue to argue about the children's time-sharing schedule or other co-parenting issues. Examples of the mid-range of high-conflict were those parents involved in litigation or those unable to communicate directly with each other. Examples of the higher of range of high-conflict would include incidents of ongoing abusive behaviour by either parent towards the other, including physical or sexual abuse. While these examples are not exclusive, they provide a way to operationalize the range of interparental high conflict. This definition can also be viewed as a heuristic device used to rate families within a high-conflict range.

### ***Operational Definition of Resilience***

Defining or operationalizing the concept suggests a pre-determined idea of resilience. This is a modification to grounded theory methodology as it is a priori understanding of the concept of resilience. However, due to the research design it was a necessary step. The research questions were interactional ones. The questions were not designed to define the concept of resilience. Markers or attributes of resilience were delineated to facilitate an understanding of how familial and community mediating factors could contribute to resilience. Therefore, in order to answer the research questions it was necessary to define the concept of resilience. This helped to focus the research on the interactional component of the questions, i.e., how did the interactions of family and community members promote resilient behaviour in the children. To reiterate, for the purpose of this study, resiliency is understood as an individual being able to exhibit adaptive characteristics in the face of an adverse life situation, i.e., ongoing parental conflict. Resiliency is seen as an outcome, not a process. Using protective factors to shield against risk factors allows the individual to access resilient characteristics.

For the purposes of this research, the domains of resilience also needed to be defined. Masten (1994) suggests that “resilience implies a qualitative evaluation of functioning based substantially on normative expectations for adaptations that vary according to age and environmental context” (p.19). For this study the attributes of resilience are bracketed within a particular age group, i.e., nine to twelve years of age, as this allows for an evaluation of functions expected of children within this age range. The rationale for choosing this age range is discussed later in this chapter.

Several factors of the child and the child's context have been identified through the literature as moderating the negative effects of family violence on the child. They include: sources of support, quality of sibling and peer relationships, involvement in school or sports activities, mentors and role models outside the family, social skills and high intelligence (Hughes, Graham-Bermann & Gruber, 2001). For school-age children, “the four domains of social competence, academic achievement, socially appropriate conduct, and emotional regulation are salient areas for defining resilience” (p. 76). This study used these indicators, based on a continuum from higher to lower functioning, in an attempt to operationalize resilience for the research. In order to find suitable candidates for the study, there was a need to pull together suitable attributes that indicate resilient behaviour. Therefore, this study used the attributes of self-esteem and/or social competence, academic achievement and socially appropriate behaviour as points of departure in defining resilient behaviour for the children. However, it was necessary to discover to what extent these characteristics were present in order to consider them as contributing to resilient behaviour. In addition, the context of the child's behaviour needed to be taken as a whole. The children entering into this study were still in the middle of conflict between their parents. It was expected that the children might be exhibiting some behaviour problems due to the interparental conflict. Therefore, as a minimum requirement, it was determined that the child would be considered resilient if s/he was relatively problem free in two of the domains defined above but symptomatic in the other two. These resilient attributes were considered as separate dimensions. For example, a child may exhibit enough social competence to enable them to get to school and take part in their classes. However, this same child

may not be able to perform his/her chores at home. As well, each of these characteristics may be more present in one child than in another. For example, on the dimension of self-esteem, one child can appear to exhibit a great deal of self-esteem, while another exhibits self-esteem only in particular settings. While resilience is not viewed on a continuum, the attributes can be considered on a continuum within each particular dimension. This method of conceptualising the attributes of resilience allowed for pre-screening of research participants and a way of understanding the concept of resilience.

## **Research Methods**

### ***Site of Population Selection***

In an effort to find a population of high-conflict, separated or divorced families, it was decided to seek participants from an agency that works with this special population. Family Conciliation is an agency within the province of Manitoba located within the Department of Family Services and Housing that works with families undergoing separation and divorce. This agency provides services that range from parent education to crisis counselling to mediation. In addition, counsellors within the agency complete family evaluations or assessments ordered through the Court of Queen's Bench, Family Division. These assessments provide recommendations both to the parents and the court in high-conflict situations. For example, parents who continue to litigate over time-sharing arrangements ask the court for help in resolving the issue. In turn the court requests an assessment through Family Conciliation which then offers a recommendation on the issues.

Family Conciliation serves over five thousand families within the City of Winnipeg, and more than two hundred families that are in ongoing conflict with respect to child-related issues. A sample from this population was used for the research project. The gatekeeper of this setting is the Director of the agency. He gave his permission to allow recruitment of the clientele of this agency for the research study.

### ***Recruitment Process of Research Participants***

Family Conciliation has a computerized database system that includes families engaged in high conflict. Using this database to find appropriate families, letters were sent to potential participants requesting their voluntary participation (Appendix B). As well, notices (Appendix C) were posted at parent education seminars given three times each week at this agency. Other recruitment methods included a distribution of notices outlining the study at various community agencies and counseling centers. Through their work with high-conflict families Family Conciliation counselors have access to children who have exhibited resilient attributes. They reviewed their caseloads and referred families meeting the criteria. Letters were then sent to these families requesting their participation in the study. Over a period of six months, twenty-five counselors with Family Conciliation referred families that fit the criteria for the study. Fifty letters were sent to families fitting the profile for this study. Approximately thirty follow-up phone calls and three in-person interviews were conducted with families expressing an interest in the study. As well, notices were posted at the parent education seminar three times each week for the six-month period with each of these seminars having fifteen to

thirty participants. In addition, over one hundred flyers were distributed to eight community centers and/or counseling agencies.

The recruitment process for this study began in January of 2004 and continued until June of 2004. By that time twelve families had agreed to be part of the study.

### ***Barriers to Recruitment of Families***

One key challenge to finding families willing to participate in the study included the conflict between the parents. More parents now have joint custody of the children and in these circumstances it was necessary to secure consents from both parents. One parent often agreed to participate while the other one was opposed to the child becoming involved in the study. In many cases this appeared indicative of the ongoing conflict and the inability of the parents to agree on issues. For example, one mother agreed to be part of the study. When the father found out she had agreed, he contacted the researcher and screamed in anger, saying that he was going to “sue the researcher and anyone else attached to the study if anyone came near his kids”.

Another example of the fear and distrust of one parent about the other is illustrated below. One mother contacted the researcher wanting to be part of the study because she felt that her both she and her son could benefit others by discussing the conflict within the context of the research. However, she was still afraid of the father and his way of handling anger. The parents had joint custody of the children, so it was essential that the father be involved in any decision to participate. After some discussion with the researcher she decided that she did not want the father approached

to be part of the study, as she felt there may be negative repercussions towards the son once the father knew the son wanted to be part of the study.

Both of the above examples illustrate the difficulty in obtaining research participants for this study. It quickly became apparent that the interparental conflict was inherent in the attempt to obtain research participants. While the researcher considered this barrier when creating this project, it was a much larger issue than predicted at the outset. Although it required a great deal of time and patience, and new strategies, such as recruiting families through alternative community and counseling centers, the initially targeted number of families was eventually recruited.

### ***Sampling Procedures***

Twelve families were recruited to be part of this research. In order to understand resiliency and the barriers to it for the children, the sample contained children who had exhibited some resilient characteristics or attributes. This represents criterion sampling or sampling where there is criteria specified for the sample to be part of the research. With respect to grounded theory terminology it is considered theoretical sampling as it focuses on efforts from theoretically useful cases or cases that give information pertaining to the research questions. This methodology suggests the importance of continuing to sample until no further pertinent information emerges from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that theoretical saturation is reached when no new relevant data emerges within the theoretical categories.

An example of theoretical sampling in this study was through a focus group with the parents. In this instance theoretical sampling was used in an effort to obtain further

information to supplement existing data where theory was emerging. For example, after preliminary data from the interviews was analyzed it became apparent that more information was needed to gain a better understanding into specific issues raised by the parents. Questions were formulated to gain further information on topics related to community support systems used and needed for the families. These topics were then discussed within the focus group.

Four resilient characteristics or attributes were identified in order to specify resiliency in children of the age group needed for this study. These concepts indicate children's resilient attributes. These indicators were used to find a relevant sample, but were only used as a guide. As earlier noted, in some children an attribute such as self-esteem might be found in one area, but not another. For example, a child might exhibit self-esteem through participation in an extra-curricular activity, but not be able to make friends at school. These attributes were viewed on a dimension, with some children exhibiting more of a particular attribute than others. The attributes of social competence, self-esteem/self-efficacy, academic achievement or socially appropriate conduct were used as indicators of resilient behaviour for the purpose of this study. To ascertain whether the children had these attributes it is necessary to understand the meaning of these concepts and how they can be applied to the children recruited for this study.

The concept of academic achievement is relatively self-explanatory. An indicator of this concept is receiving average or above average grades. For the other concepts a more thorough discussion is necessary. For example, a broad definition of competence includes effectively adapting to the environment to further the process of

development (Garmezy & Masten, 1991). Kirby and Fraser (1997) associate this concept with "sustained competence under stress" (p.14). Rutter (1984) describes social competence as adaptability and social-problem solving skills. For example, socially competent children are able to think of and operationalize a range of solutions to problems. Therefore, children in this population would be considered socially competent if they were able to display an ability to cope with the ongoing conflict of their parents, including the ability to continue to carry out their routine functions, i.e., attending school.

Competence also serves as a protective factor of children through the development of self-efficacy, i.e., a belief in one's personal effectiveness. In a review of the research in the area, Kirby and Fraser (1997) suggest that self-efficacy promotes adaptation, coping, and achievement in many areas of the child's life. Therefore, self-esteem and self-efficacy could be seen as comparable. Self-esteem is understood as having positive feelings related to self-worth and the ability to deal with everyday challenges. Self-efficacy involves a solid feeling of self-worth, and a positive perception of one's abilities. Consistent with this premise, Norman (2000) suggests that self-efficacy includes a sense of self-worth or self-esteem and the ability to have some control over the external environment.

In order to understand appropriate social competence, academic achievement, self-esteem or self-efficacy, it needs to be assessed relative to the context of the child's developmental stage. In other words, the developmental level is a factor that affects his/her coping ability. Age-related changes in motor skills, memory, cognitive

processing, and language play a part in how children adapt and execute various coping strategies (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 2001).

Within the literature on separation and divorce, there is little research completed on the effects of the separation on children of specific age ranges or how these children experience commonly identified developmental stages. In order to eliminate the potential problems of dealing with different stages of growth and development this research attempted to examine a particular age range. The selection of children within a certain age range then has an advantage on one hand but may not be able to yield results applicable to other age ranges. However, as this study was exploratory the decision was made to focus on one age-range.

Children selected to be part of the study were between the ages of nine to twelve years of age. Erickson (1980) refers to the ages between six and twelve as being a stage of ego development. This implies ability and skill to complete tasks successfully. Competence becomes part of this skill set, as it is an effective adaptation to the environment. Ego competence is defined as children engaging and striving to master their environment. Children of this age are able to use cognitive strategies for coping (i.e., problem-solving behaviour); thus they are able to exhibit social competence as a resilient characteristic. Werner (1990) describes her work with resilient children from this age range. She identifies it as middle childhood. She found that the resilient children had a keen sense of competence and self-efficacy. They possessed well-developed problem-solving and communication skills. This left them able to control their impulses and concentrate on their schoolwork, despite stressful life events. Research with children of this age range provides us with information regarding

children's ability to achieve social competence, despite the interparental conflict. It can help to show how children in this developmental stage are able to overcome barriers and utilize protective factors through their interactions with family and community members.

Another important resilient attribute is socially appropriate conduct. Behaviour problems in children are often associated with witnessing interparental conflict. Much of the literature on this subject has suggested that children show inappropriate behaviour as a way of dealing with their parents' conflict. Therefore, resiliency in this context would suggest that children are able to manage their conduct despite the ongoing interparental conflict.

To obtain a relevant sample, pre-screening occurred. Part of this recruitment involved counsellors at Family Conciliation helping to screen for potential families. As a next step the researcher met with the parents to ask questions about the child and how s/he had coped with the separation and ongoing conflict. Suitability for this study was defined as a child within the family having at least two of the four attributes or markers of resilience. As part of this research examines barriers to resilience, it was necessary to recruit children who also lack some resilient characteristics. Questions based on the concepts are outlined in Appendix A. The pre-screening of a theoretically relevant sample was based on the answers to these questions by the parent or parents. If both parents were willing to be involved in the research the interview guide was administered to both of them. Otherwise it was used with the one parent willing to be part of the study. Based on the answers it was determined by both the parent/s and the researcher whether the child had enough resilient characteristics to be considered

eligible to participate in the study. The determination was completed in two steps. First, a summary of the results to the pre-screening questionnaire was given to the parents. Parental opinions were sought to ascertain whether the children had enough resilient characteristics to be part of the study. As well, the researcher consulted with two counsellors at Family Conciliation. These counselors agreed to act as the Panel of Experts as they have extensive knowledge and experience in this area. Through these discussions the criteria for resilient attributes was discussed and applied to the results of the pre-screening interview. Some children in the sample appeared to have a large number of resilient characteristics; others had only the minimal amount needed to be part of the study. Discussion with the parents in the pre-screening interview was used as the key determination of the children's resilient attributes. Two children were screened out of the study as they exhibited very few resilient characteristics. For example, one child appeared to be quite depressed, showed little social competence and was having problems with his academic studies.

### ***Data-Gathering Methods***

Within grounded theory, generating theory is 'grounded' in semi-structured interviews, field-work observations, case-study documentation and other forms of textual material (Pidgeon, 1996). The grounded theory approach is based on the notion that data should be collected and analyzed in a way that allows the basic social, psychological and structural processes inherent in a given phenomenon to emerge naturally. In order to do so, the following methods of collecting information provided

the raw data for this study. They are listed in the chronological order of their implementation.

- Interviews with parents. Interviews were held with either one parent or both parents, depending on if both parents had agreed to be part of the research process. As a starting point, individual meetings were held with each parent. Alternatively, if only one parent agreed to be part of the project, an interview was held with that parent. At minimum the custodial parent either had to agree to be part of the study or give written permission to have the child be part of the research. If the parents had joint custody, both of them had to give written permission for the child to be part of the study, even if only one of them participated in it. Originally it was thought that interviews with both parents could take place depending on the level of conflict between them. This would generate a discussion, thereby furthering an understanding of what family interactions contribute to resiliency in the child. However, due to the levels of conflict between the parents, none of them wanted to meet together within the context of this study. The parents were also interviewed using a semi-structured format. Questions were divided into three sections. The first section dealt with questions about the interparental conflict prior to the separation, e.g., what type of conflict was there between them as well as asking if the child witnessed this conflict. The second section focused on changes in the family since the separation, as well as questions about the current relationship with the other parent. This section included questions about changes in the child's behaviour observed by either the parent or extended family members. The final section highlighted how the child and the family had adapted to the separation and

ongoing interparental conflict. Parents were asked about informal and formal resources, specifically with respect to either family or community support systems. A complete outline of the questions asked of the parents can be found in Appendix E.

- Interviews with children. Children between the ages of nine to twelve were asked to be part of this project. Due to their age, they were able to talk, draw or journal as a way of communicating their ideas to the interviewer. At minimum one interview was held with the child. If more than one meeting was required in order to either gain the trust of the child or complete the questionnaire, two interviews were held with each child. As resilience may be a developmental process, issues connected to the children's age and stage of development were noted. Questions in the interviews were organized according to the research questions through a semi-structured format. This format allowed for both closed and open-ended questions. Questions for the children were divided into five sections. The first one included asking about their situation prior to the separation e.g., what they remembered about their parents before the separation. The second section included questions about the changes since the separation and what helped them cope with those changes. The third section included questions about how the children coped with the ongoing parental conflict, e.g., what they did to make themselves feel better when their parents were in conflict. The fourth section focused on the barriers to the children coping with the ongoing parental conflict, i.e., what kept them from doing as well as they could at school or at home. The final section focused on peer and community resources, e.g., which people have been the most helpful since the separation as well as

questions about extracurricular activities and relationships with community members. Appendix D provides a summary of the above questions.

- Participant research. This included one focus group with the parents. A focus group allowed the parents to discuss the relevant issues and gave the researcher the ability to arrive at conclusions that moved beyond information from individual interviews. This way of collecting information augmented the existing data. It was also used as a form of member checking as issues raised through the individual interviews were identified in the group. This ensured that previously collected data was organized and coded as the participants had intended. A separate consent form was signed allowing the parents to understand the implications of participating in the group (See Appendix I). It also provided a venue for the parents to come together and discuss some of the issues relevant to their children. The focus group was conducted after all the individual interviews were completed. By this time categories had begun to emerge. Using the concept of theoretical saturation, additional questions were asked in an effort to saturate the evolving categories obtained from previous data. The information obtained was helpful both in saturating the existing categories and building additional ones. The questions were structured as open-ended ones in an effort to allow the parents more options in how to discuss the issues relevant to the subject matter. Using open-ended questions proved helpful to the generation of ideas amongst the group participants. For example, when a question was framed using the words ‘how did that work for your family’ it generated a great deal of information about the issue. (See Appendix K for an outline of the questions). The questions were divided into three categories that

included the degree the child was involved in the interparental conflict, the support of family and community, and finally the resources necessary for family members. The key issue discussed during the first part of the meeting was how the children continued to be caught in the middle of the interparental conflict and how they had come to reconcile themselves to be in that environment. The specific questions that helped to understand this process were geared to finding out how much the children had been part of the interparental conflict to how the children used outside support systems.

- Interviews with community members and/or extended family members. During the first interview with the parent, they were asked to identify a community member, teacher or extended family member that would be an appropriate person to interview. Interviews took place with counsellors or other community members involved in working with families in this population. In two families extended family members were interviewed as they provided a large part of the child's social support. There was one collateral contacted for each family. This was often a teacher or resource person from the school that had worked with the family or child in the recent past. Examples of questions asked of the collateral contacts are found in Appendix F. Questions to these collateral contacts centered on the child's coping strategies. For example, teachers talked about how the child related to their peers at school or handled conflict in the classroom. Extended family members talked about the coping strategies of the child within the family. Those interviews often provided further data on the protective factors and generally augmented existing data obtained from either the child or the parent/s.

- Reviewing Family Conciliation case files and Court of Queen's Bench files. Only family files that were pertinent to the study were reviewed. However, most of the families in the study had already worked with a counselor at Family Conciliation, the work site for this project. The researcher read through the notes on these files in an attempt to gain further information regarding specific issues mentioned through the interviews with the parents. For example, if a counselor had completed a family assessment there may have been a more detailed explanation of how the conflict affected family members or what the parents had attempted in an effort to resolve the conflict. Reading these family files proved beneficial as it often helped to either underline or expand on the information received through the individual interviews. This became another way of broadening or adding to categories already emerging through the previous forms of data collection. If a family had been involved in litigation their file at the Court of Queen's Bench was examined. These reviews gave background information on issues connected with the family with respect to the conflict. It also provided information related to past attempts at resolution of the conflict, interactions of various family members or how the children had witnessed the conflict. At times it provided information with respect to the barriers of children utilizing protective factors. Alternatively it provided information of conflict resolution mechanisms that helped the children find other ways of coping. As well, it provided some information on socio-economic status and the cultural background of the participants. Pertinent information from the file was used as field notes, transcribed and then compiled as raw data in conjunction with information gained

through both the individual interviews, the focus group and collateral contacts.

These reviews were completed as the last phase of data collection.

### ***Summary of Data Collection***

The main questions of this research were linked to understanding which mediating factors within the family and the community promote resilience in children within these families and secondly, how the children perceive them. The other component of this study explored the barriers to resilient behaviour for the children. As a way of exploring the complexities of this phenomenon, questions were asked of the research participants. These questions were asked in semi-structured interviews, both with the parents and the children. The answers to these questions formed much of the data for the analysis of this research. Additional questions were often asked of the participants as the research process evolved. Within the grounded theory approach it is important to saturate all the categories in order to ensure that all the topics are fully explored. This sometimes required asking different or related questions to better understand the essence of resilience.

### ***Recording, Analyzing and Managing Data***

The grounded theory approach allows for some flexibility in data analysis. However, as a guide, specific steps are suggested within each stage of the research. The steps move from acquiring unstructured data, to the generation of description codes, to a more developed conceptual understanding, and to then finally moving in the direction of wider theoretical interpretations. Part of this analysis includes the use of 'constant

comparison', a term associated with grounded theory. As a way of ensuring theoretical saturation, it is important to use constant comparison to continually look for similarities and differences between incidents and issues discussed by the participants. Similar incidents and issues are grouped accordingly and form categories. As the same issues begin to reoccur within the categories, theoretical saturation is reached.

Within this study, as a way of recording data in a systematic manner, notes were taken during the interviews with the participants. As well, a tape recorder was used during the interviews with the participants' consent. A research assistant transcribed information from the taped interviews. The transcribed data, (i.e., text) was then entered into a computer qualitative software program to be coded and categorized. The focus group was recorded with a video camera as a way of capturing the interaction and the information gained during the session. Notes were made when reading through case files. When the tape recording or note taking interfered with the flow of the interactions, notes of the interviews were completed directly after the interviews. However, this only happened on two occasions.

In analysis, creativity is an important component of the grounded theory approach to research. However, there are criteria that help in the analysis of the data. In description, data can be organized according to themes, which are summaries of the data.

Within the grounded theory approach, coding is a central way in which data is broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. "It is the central process by which theories are built from data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57). These steps are referred to as 'open coding', 'axial coding' and 'selective coding'. Open coding

refers to that part of the analysis that deals with labeling and categorizing of phenomena as indicated by the data. Key words or phrases delineate significant incidents or processes. In this study open coding consisted of going back into the text of the transcripts and finding phrases, sentences or paragraphs describing issues connected to the research questions. For example, parents' description of the conflict or children witnessing conflict between their parents was highlighted as coded data. Data are then grouped into categories. In other words, the codes are clustered into related categories. The task is to find ways of describing the process. This includes specific words or phrases describing the interactions and finding categories that encompass these concepts. For example, one category was entitled 'Post-separation changes'. This category described the process and the interactions of both the parents and children that changed after the separation. These changes were related to communication, resolution of issues, and access between the child and non-custodial parent. This category represents a set of concepts directed to a particular process, i.e., changes since the separation.

The next step in the analysis is axial coding, i.e., how data gets put back together that allows us to make connections between a category, its sub-categories and other main categories. In this study a category, family strengths, emerged as the central category. From that category connections were drawn to other categories. Interrelationships between the various categories are described and examined.

Selective coding involves the integration of these categories that have been developed to form the initial theoretical framework (Pandit, 1996). This involves noting patterns, i.e., how the interactions between family members promote resiliency

in children. It sets the stage for the development of a proposition in which a core category is systemically related to the other categories. From this a theory emerges that has been grounded in the data. Creswell (1998) describes this low-level theory as differentiated from theories of greater abstraction and applicability. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.174) suggest that “this type of theory evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situational context”. Alternatively, a formal theory emerges from a study of a phenomenon examined under many different types of situations. In this study a low-level theoretical model was formed based on the concept of family strengths as this category emerged as the central one. This low-level or substantive theory is only applicable to the population of high-conflict families with children between the ages of nine to twelve years of age as this was the situation studied.

The phrase ‘paradigm model’ is used in conjunction with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (1998) defines this model as a ‘coding paradigm’. It reflects how data becomes organized by linking causal conditions or antecedent conditions that become part of the phenomenon. This is considered within a particular context. The intervening conditions and actions or interaction within this context help to determine the consequences. Ideas gained through coding the data give rise to more questions. These questions can be asked in a different context with the participants in an attempt to gain a further understanding of the phenomenon. In this study the focus group allowed the researcher to ask questions that had arisen from the initial coding of the interviews as the focus group occurred after the individual interviews. In the end, the ‘selective coding’ determines the core category and relates it

to the other categories, allowing for a way of determining how the final theory will be shaped.

The grounded theory of research suggests using 'constant comparison' and 'theoretical sampling'. Both are advocated primarily as “a means of generating theory, as well as of building conceptual and theoretical depth of analysis” (Pidgeon, 1996, p. 78). They go hand in hand as strategies to build theory.

The idea of constant comparison suggests the need for ongoing evaluations of emergent categories that are part of coding. It allows the research to grow and change, depending on what data is being collected. It seeks to explain the variability within the sample.

Theoretical sampling involves “the active sampling of new cases as a way to prove theoretical relevance to the evolving theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176). As suggested earlier, it allows sampling to be driven by theoretical concerns, not just through random sampling as a way to ensure findings can be generalized. Therefore, unlike sampling done in quantitative investigations, theoretical sampling allows the researcher to make sampling decisions within the research process itself. However, this theoretical sampling focuses the research effort on those cases that either test or extend evolving theory. As a theoretical model emerged, it became apparent that the data achieved a level of consistency across the twelve families involved in the study. In fact after sampling from approximately eight families, no new information emerged. However it may be necessary to test or extend the new theoretical framework in an attempt to validate the findings. This could be accomplished through acquiring data from families within the same population.

## **Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

To ensure the credibility of any research project, the concepts of validity and reliability need to be addressed. For example, in quantitative research, validity is defined as ensuring that the chosen instrument used to measure data is measuring what it is supposed to measure. In qualitative research, the researcher is considered instrumental in obtaining the necessary data. In this study the researcher used in-depth interviews as a primary method of obtaining raw data. As there was an interview guide, the interviews followed certain patterns. However, the interviews were semi-structured so that the researcher was the instrument used in obtaining the relevant data. Therefore, validity is connected to the competence of the researcher and the rigor applied throughout the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest substituting the terms validity and reliability with trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research. This allows for a better understanding of how research can be considered credible if it is conducted within a naturalistic setting. Patton (1990) notes three issues that deem a qualitative study as credible. They include: rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data, the credibility of the researcher, and the fit between the philosophical research paradigm and the research in question.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that the strength of a qualitative study that aims to explore a process, or pattern of interaction will rest with its validity. As a way of confirming validity, detailed descriptions of how data is obtained and analyzed show the complexities of processes and interactions. These descriptions are embedded within the data that are part of their naturalistic setting. Therefore, within the parameters of that setting and population, the research will be valid. In this project, the parameters

were adequately stated, thereby placing boundaries around the study and helping to ensure validity. For example, in this study the children's age was a parameter. Using an age range ensured a higher rate of validity as developmental issues for a particular stage of child development could also be discussed within the interactions of family members.

Another way to increase the construct validity and the reliability of this study is to ensure that the data collection protocol be conducted in a rigorous manner. This would allow others to replicate the study. As a way of implementing rigor into this study, a detailed log was compiled of the procedures employed. For example, specific information detailing how the children were selected to be part of the study was kept, and this has been summarized in the thesis. This allows others to understand how the sample was selected.

There are other specific criteria that can be used to deem qualitative research trustworthy. They include member checking, reflexivity, triangulation and peer review or debriefing (Angen, 2000).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility is through member checks" (p. 314). This involves going back to the research participants after initial coding and categorizing is complete and then asking the participants if the information adequately states what they had intended. This was done with the children, parents and collateral contacts in this study. With respect to member checking with the children, after the interview/s were completed the researcher re-contacted the child. A brief synopsis of the information gained from the interview was reviewed with him/her. He/she was then asked if there were any further comments

or ideas they had or wished to offer. At the time of the first interview, all of the research participants were informed that they would have the opportunity of meeting with the researcher to discuss the results of the research. For example, after the initial analysis was completed the researcher offered to meet on a second occasion with each parent. During this meeting the results of the initial analysis could be given. The parents were then asked if this information reflected their stories or interpretations of the issues. If not, clarification was gained by further discussions. This happened with three parents, as they wanted to talk more about their situation and clarify issues raised in the first interview. With the parents the other way member checking was used was through the focus group. During the focus group with the parents ideas put forward by individuals were reviewed and clarification of these ideas was obtained. If parents could not attend the focus group, information was reviewed with them over the phone.

Reflexivity refers to an attempt by the researcher to examine her own biases, thus enabling her to obtain some objective distance between the self and the subject of the study. If the researcher is the chief instrument used in a qualitative study, it is incumbent upon the researcher to understand the need for objectivity. Patton (1990) suggests that complete objectivity is impossible. Instead, the researcher needs to provide empathic neutrality within the context of the research. This allows for the researcher to use experience and insight, while not having a preconceived idea of what the research might reveal. In this study it was necessary to be vigilant with respect to my objectivity, as this subject matter has been part of my clinical work for several years. However, the experience and understanding of these issues also allowed for a deeper inquiry into the subject. In other words, the researcher used her years of

experience and professional study of this topic to enhance empathic interviewing and through the interpretation of data.

An important way to strengthen a qualitative research design is through the use of triangulation. Triangulation requires researchers to make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation enhances the internal validity of the study. It offers a way of explaining how accounts and actions in one setting are influenced or constrained by those in another. There are different types of triangulation. For example, "data triangulation refers to the use of a variety of data sources in a study" (Patton, 1990, p. 186). In this research study, various sources of data were utilized including data from in-depth interviews with family and community members. Other data sources included discussion through a focus group with the parents that provided a different way of obtaining information from the parents, i.e., through their interaction and discussion.

Peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process (Creswell, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that this can be considered similar to interrater reliability in quantitative research. In qualitative research this can also be used in the initial stage of coding. In this study, peer review took place with the Panel of Experts and with dissertation committee members. For example, within the interview process one child was having difficulty finding a way to communicate her ideas and feelings about the issues raised. Upon consultation with the Panel of Experts, one of whom does play therapy with children, it was decided that the interview process with this child would consist mostly of her drawing and acting out her ideas about her situation. Information obtained in this way proved to a useful way of gaining data about

the situation. As another example, data collected through the focus group was discussed with the Panel of Experts. Data obtained through the focus group included information with respect to parent education issues. As one of the members of the Panel currently runs a parent education seminar it helped to have her to sort through the data acquired through the focus group. Dissertation committee members have also been instrumental in discussing the results of the interviews. Through these discussions there were new insights into the results of data. These discussions contributed to understanding patterns that emerged from the various categories, and provided the researcher with added insight into the meaning of particular information collected or observed.

### **Personal Biography**

Within qualitative research, the researcher is a primary research instrument. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to have a thorough understanding of the issues related to the study. Also, well-developed interview techniques and observational skills are important tools to bring to this type of study.

The writer has worked at the study site, Family Conciliation, for approximately fifteen years in the capacity of mediator, assessor and counsellor. Clinical work has included interviewing children, assessing family situations and becoming grounded in the issues facing separated and divorcing families. While assessing family situations it is necessary to observe the family interactions as well as ask pertinent questions relating to a newly blended family or ongoing conflict between the parents. Working with families in mediation increases communication and interviewing skills. This combined experience has allowed for a thorough understanding of the day-to-day issues facing

families who continue to experience post-separation conflict. As well, it has helped to develop the necessary skills to move into research in this area. For example, in this study in-depth interviews were completed with parents, children, extended family members and community members. Experience in interviewing and working with this population allowed for the writer to ask the necessary questions to obtain the information needed for this study. Clinical expertise in this area was helpful in understanding the issues associated with the family interactions that in turn produced effective research questions. However, due to the need to keep clinical work and research as separate as possible, it was necessary for ongoing vigilance while interviewing and meeting with family members. For example, during some interviews many of the parents were still having a difficult time finding appropriate ways to communicate with the other parent. A clinically-focused interview would have involved intervention activities such as offering information or talking about how to make some changes. However, as this was a research interview, it required some effort to simply obtain the information needed for the study and refrain from other comments or suggestions. Referrals to appropriate counselling services were then made after the interviews were completed.

Ethical considerations with respect to completing research with families at this worksite were discussed with the Director of Family Conciliation. Through discussions, it was decided that only families with whom the researcher had not worked would be recruited. As well, the decision was made that the researcher would not work in the future with any families that were part of the study. This decision was made to guard against bias and loss of neutrality in the context of court ordered assessments and

mediation. It also ensured that the researcher had never been nor will be in a position of power vis-à-vis the participants of the study.

### **Ethical and Political Considerations**

There are particular ethical guidelines that were considered in this research. When completing research with children, it is important to reflect on issues of power inherent within adult-child relationships. As well, the idea of power and feelings of powerlessness within children of divorce need to be reflected within the ethical guidelines of this project. It is important not to reinforce young people's powerlessness as they continue to grieve over the loss of their parent's separation. For example, they are often not consulted with respect to parental time-sharing arrangements. Due to the parental separation the children are already involved in a transition in their lives that was not of their choosing and require a special effort to communicate with an outside person. Despite the need for careful attention to process and ethics, it is important to include children's voices when completing research about children.

There are inherent limitations to this type of research study if children are not included. Children need to be heard with respect to their ideas and ways of understanding their situation. This project attempted to do so by focusing on the children's view of their family situation and from there exploring the complex interactions within their family.

Qualitative research brings forward specific ethical considerations. Patton (1990) states that as qualitative methods are highly interpersonal and take the researcher into the intimate lives of others; they are more intrusive than quantitative inquiry.

Madak (1994) suggests that it is difficult to cover a comprehensive set of ethical guidelines that would cover all qualitative methods. For example, the context of the research and how the information is collected will differ depending on the approach of the naturalistic inquiry. It is incumbent upon the researcher to consider ramifications of particular processes and procedures before beginning interviews, observations or other methods of data collection.

Despite variations in context that affect information gathering in qualitative research, there are some universal guiding principles that were adhered to in this research study. They are outlined below.

- Research participants, regardless of their age, were treated fairly, considerately, and respectfully.
- The research sought to benefit young people and find services through its recommendations for families in high-conflict.
- Children and parents were given information about the project. This included stating the purpose of the research and the ways in which the data might be used. This information was given verbally and in writing.
- The research respected people's right to self-determination. In order to protect both the children and the parents in these families, they could choose not to continue with the research or ask questions themselves. This allowed them to make their own decisions about particular changes or ways to utilize information gained through this process.
- Participants had the right to be informed about the progress of the research, provide feedback, and be involved in action arising from the research. For example,

particular interventions or policy changes were recommended as a result of this research. Participants were made aware that these recommendations would be included in the final report that would be made available to them.

- Informed consent was asked from parents. The Informed Consent form (Appendix G) outlined what was expected of parents. It included what was expected of them and the possible consequences of being part of the study. This also included releasing consent for the researcher to discuss pertinent family information with teachers, counsellors or other significant collateral contacts.
- Assent in the form of a consent form of the children was required (Appendix H). This entailed an explanation of what was expected from the children and how they could be part of the process. The children were asked if they understood the information and if so, they signed the assent form. They were given a copy of it.
- Participants were assured of confidentiality. Participants' names and addresses were kept confidential. Within the context of data management, participants were given numbers to assure that their identity would not be revealed. As well, the location of the one parent was not revealed to the other parent. However, if any of the participants revealed being abused or abusing others in their family the researcher was required to inform the appropriate authorities.
- If any of the participants needed help to resolve emotional issues brought forward due to discussions as part of the research, appropriate referrals for counselling services were made. This occurred with several parents and two of the children. The parents were given a list of counselling centers and individuals in their

community. It was suggested to the children that they talk with their parents, school counselor, or extended family members if they wanted further help.

If there were other ethical or political considerations brought forward by research participants, a discussion between all stakeholders of this project on how to proceed was held in an attempt to resolve them. For example, with one family, the researcher needed to decide if it was a conflict of interest due to a short period of past work experience with them. After discussion with the Director of Family Conciliation it was decided that it was a conflict of interest, and for this reason the family was not included in the sample for the project.

Approval of the procedures used in conducting this research was obtained from the Ethics Protocol Submission Committee at the University of Manitoba (see Appendix J).

The next two chapters discuss the findings from this research study. Chapter Four presents the results from a demographic and narrative perspective. Chapter Five provides a thorough data analysis along with an emerging theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER IV

### DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FROM DATA ANALYSIS

Both this chapter and the next one focus on the results of the data. This chapter delineates the analytic strategy as well as providing a descriptive analysis of the data.

The first section of the chapter is a summary of raw data gained from the various sources, including the interviews, focus group discussion and the reading of pertinent files. For example, the questions in the interviews were designed to elicit answers to the research questions. Out of these semi-structured interviews came ideas for categories and the beginning of an understanding of the phenomena involved in this study. As well, there is a discussion of the way in which the participants responded to the interview questions, including how the format was altered to be more responsive to their needs.

The second component of this chapter provides a general overview of the data, including demographic variables, custodial arrangements of the children and a gender breakdown of the children interviewed in this study. The third part of the chapter includes a narrative of the families, which highlights key aspects of the process of the conflict both before and after the separation, the composition of the family, at the time of the interviews, and the coherence of the family members. This narrative information is provided on a case by case basis. Using the operational definition of high-conflict families proposed in Chapter Three, this narrative section includes a discussion of how each family fits on the continuum of high-conflict. In this description the families are identified by numbers from one through twelve in the order they were interviewed. The

final component of this chapter discusses some of the differences between these families and the continuum of resilience that is exhibited by the children.

## **Sources of Data**

### ***Interviews***

Interviewing family members proved to be a vital way of understanding the meaning of their experiences. It led the researcher to consider new areas and ways of conceptualizing the issues involved in the study. The interviews played a central part in beginning to understand the categories included in the data. Twelve families were interviewed as part of this study. This included one parent from ten families and two parents from two families. The duration of these interviews ranged from one to two hours. Four parents were interviewed on two separation occasions, as these parents felt it necessary to add more to their story. One child was interviewed from each family. These interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour in length. The parents and children were interviewed either in an office setting or in their homes. The location of the interviews was decided on by the family members as it was important that they feel as comfortable as possible when discussing the issues.

Collateral contacts were also interviewed. In discussion with the researcher, either the parent or child identified the appropriate collateral contact. The collateral contact was deemed as having played a significant role in the child's life over the past one to two years. Phone or in-person interviews were held with each collateral contact and were approximately thirty minutes to an hour in length. In total thirty- eight interviews were completed with family members and collateral contacts.

Interviewing and talking with the children provided a way of understanding how they felt and understood their family situation. It allowed the researcher to step into their worlds and attempt to understand how they were coping. Being with the children, even for a short period of time, gave the researcher a chance of understanding the family dynamics from a different perspective. With some children it verified what the parents had said. In other instances gaining information from the children provided a different way of understanding how they coped with the interparental conflict on a daily basis. It was also the first step in organizing the data collected from the children's stories. For example, in the interviews with the children specific questions were asked about how they coped with their parents' conflict, both before and after the separation. When the children talked about witnessing conflict between their parents they also showed elements of individual strengths, or individual ways of coping, one of the categories eventually identified from the data. As an example, one child stated, "When my parents argued, I just tried to close the door and not listen. My sister and I would just go to her room. We would listen to music and try not to hear what was going on between my parents."

Another child stated that he tried to get away from his parents' conflict because "there was no point in getting involved and it's best if they stop the argument themselves so they can learn something from that". This boy showed a high level of analytical sophistication as he was able to understand the need for his parents to work out the issues between them. Both these comments show that the children were able to use their individual strengths and resources to distance themselves from the interparental conflict.

While all the children wanted to talk about their experiences, some found it difficult to verbalize their thoughts and ideas on the subject. Drawing and writing a short journal were the techniques used when the child could not understand or answer the pre-set questions. Some of the children were quite verbal and able to articulate how they viewed the conflict between their parents or to whom they turned to if they needed support. All the children were able to communicate their feelings to the writer in some manner.

Although all the parents agreed to answer the questions outlined in the semi-structured interview guide, many found it difficult to move beyond blaming the other parent or focusing on the conflict. During the interviews, it often proved helpful allow the parent take the lead with respect to how and when they answered the questions. Interviewing the parents in this way allowed them to tell their story of the separation and the ongoing interparental conflict. For example, many of them needed to talk about how the interparental conflict continued to provide problems for the child and the rest of the family before moving onto a discussion of strengths and coping strategies. Most of the parents understood that the children often felt they were put in the middle of the interparental conflict. One of the parents stated that her son, “witnessed pushing and shoving and us arguing in loud voices. That time my husband smashed my wrist into the steering wheel”.

This mother discussed how the conflict continued to be part of their lives. She stated that,

His father told him I had called the police to get him to, you know, this past weekend to try and get contact with him. My son comes home and he goes why did you call the police mom?

Another mother also talked about the impact of the ongoing conflict on her son.

She stated,

The latest thing that happened was I received a six-page letter from my ex and it was like I hate you this and I hate you that. My son got hold of it. He saw it. He read it.

Another mother discussed how money issues were the greatest source of interparental conflict, both before and since the separation. After the separation the conflict around money became child support issues. Parents wanted the researcher to fully understand how the conflict had been a distinct part of the separation and in some families how it continued to be the stumbling block prohibiting the healing of family members. One of the research questions asked about future barriers to resilient behaviour of the children. One of the significant categories found through the coding of the data was the interparental conflict, a finding expected from the review of the literature on this subject. This led to the realization that one of the barriers to resilience was the ongoing conflict between the parents.

There were many other topics of conversation with both the children and parents that evolved from the interviews. One led to categories connected to communication and resolution of issues between the parents. In later analysis these two sub-categories became a category encompassing changes since the separation. Other compelling topics included consideration of strengths, both individual and family strengths. Discussions by both parents and children allowed for a thorough understanding of how both individual and family strengths played the central role in the way the children responded to interparental conflict.

### ***Focus Group***

As well as being a tool for triangulation of the data, i.e., a form of member checking, the focus group was another way of moving forward in categorizing the data. This research collection strategy proved useful and stimulating as a way of collecting additional information from the parents.

Questions asked through the focus group generated a great deal of discussion amongst the parents. While some of the answers were similar to those in the individual interviews with the parents, within the group setting the answers generated strategies and ideas for change.

Answers to the questions from the focus group allowed for the formulation of additional categories within family and external supports. For example, a question asked the parents to consider how they are able to help their children use the social or collateral supports that had been identified. One mother stated,

I have supported Susan (name changed due to confidentiality) becoming close to her grandmother right from the beginning because I am extremely close to my mom. More than my brother and sister are to her. And my mom has always had this different connection with my child compared to any of her other grandchildren. My mom has always made herself available to my child and I have always supported that with Susan. Even if they don't talk to each other in person, they talk on the phone. And thank goodness for those free long distance calls when my mother is at the lake in the summer. They just talk and laugh together and this can go on for fifteen minutes. My mom is always telling her funny stories or talking about her animals. I think Susan finds this comforting. I encourage her to go and see or talk to my mother when she feels down. I know that Susan will get on the phone and talk to my mother when her father and I have had a fight or if she gets mad about something.

Another highlight of the focus group was that the parents were able to give examples of how their children showed different ways of coping with the interparental conflict. This proved helpful in the collection of the data as well as providing an

example of positive adaptation for the other parents in the group. In the following example a father talked about how he helped his daughter to negotiate as a way of supporting her in the area of resolving conflict. He stated,

One of our things in my house was if there was something my daughter really wanted it was ok, you write down the reasons why I should say yes and we'll make it our contract. And then you follow through on your contract. So now she's using that as bargaining, because we're having the same problem with the same situation when it comes to holidays; what we used to have now isn't working in favour of the other party. So at eleven my daughter is at the point where she will say no I don't want to do that. And I will support her in her decision, tell her to write down her reasons, and give her written ideas to her mother for her.

Through the individual interviews parents had already discussed barriers to the resilience of their child. The interactive component of the focus group allowed the parents to brainstorm ideas of how to break down these barriers and help their children move forward despite the ongoing conflict. For example, one parent stated,

How do I know when my child or I need help? Should I take a parent education class? I've never done anything like that or never talked to a counselor. How do I know when my child needs to see someone? I just get so frustrated sometimes because all my friends have their own opinions on what is best for my family and me.

In response another parent stated, "I would like a pre-mediation class, a place to learn about what I need to get ready to talk to my husband."

Further discussion on this topic led to ideas for recommendations and needed changes in policy that are necessary in order for appropriate services to be put into place, allowing the children to maximize their potential for resilient behaviour. These recommendations are discussed in Chapter Six.

### ***Family and Court of Queen's Bench Files***

A final way of collecting data was completed through the reading of pertinent files. This data was incorporated into the narrative component outlined in the next component of this chapter.

Some of the families involved in the study had been to the Court of Queen's Bench in an attempt to resolve their issues. The researcher read these files after completing the interviews and the focus group in an attempt to 'saturate the categories' or continue to broaden the categories already in place through other data collection methods. In some cases new information emerged as a result of reading the files and in other cases the information had already been received through the interviews with the parents and children.

### **Demographic Variables**

Twelve families participated in this research study. The gender breakdown of the children interviewed was four boys and eight girls. Of the children interviewed, there were three nine-year olds, four ten-year olds, four eleven-year olds, and one twelve-year old. The mean age of the children was 10.25 years.

Of the twelve families involved in this study, half the parents were in common law unions and half were married during the time they were together. The time spent in their relationships ranged from eight months to thirteen years, and the mean was 5.9 years. The length of time these parents were separated ranged from eighteen months to thirteen years. The average was 6.2 years. The number of children in the families ranged from one to three, with the mean being 1.5 children per family. In seven out of

the twelve families both parents were living with new partners. In three families, only the mother was with a new partner and in one family only the father was in a new relationship. In the remaining family both the mother and father have remained single since the separation.

The families were asked about their cultural background. Out of the twelve families both parents from two families stated that they were of Aboriginal descent. Both parents from another family immigrated from Poland. The parents from the other families were all born in Canada and they were Caucasian.

With respect to the custodial arrangements for the children, the parents from four families had joint custody; in three families there were joint custody agreements with one parent having final decision-making authority. In the other four families one parent had sole custody. Where the parents had joint custody, consent forms to speak with the children were obtained from both parents.

### **Case by Case Narrative**

This component of the chapter will provide a narrative of each of the twelve families involved in this project. The information for these narratives is derived from the raw data in this research. The sources of this data include children's interviews, parents' interviews and information from the Family Conciliation and Court of Queen's Bench files. Included is the composition of the family, socio-economic status, cultural information, as well as marital history including the interparental conflict and the children's reactions to it. The current family structure and the time-sharing arrangements for the children are delineated. All these families had made some

attempts to change patterns that lead to their conflict. A brief synopsis of this information is also provided on a case by case basis. At the end of each family's description a summary of the child's ability to exhibit resilient characteristics is provided. This allows for a way to begin to understand how the analysis of the data fits with the family structure and the ongoing parental conflict.

Grounded theory methodology incorporates theoretical sensitivity as a way to gain insight to the data. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of insight from prior professional experience, literature reviews and personal experience with the population (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It represents an important creative aspect of grounded theory. Techniques used to gain theoretical sensitivity include the use of questioning, comparisons of stories, and the analysis of a single word, phrase or sentence. It provides a beginning to the analytical process as it suggests an insight and understanding of a phenomenon that increases as the researcher interacts with the data. For example, it allows the researcher to begin to develop small theoretical frameworks about the concepts and their relationships. Theoretical sensitivity was used to sift through the data, providing an awareness of the subtleties derived from the stories of the family members and other pertinent information.

As part of each family narrative, there is a discussion of how the family fits into the continuum of high-conflict. This is a heuristic device used to rate families within a high-conflict range. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, high-conflict parents seem unable to move beyond the entrenched conflict between them. Within the high-conflict range there are differences in the level of conflict. This requires the need

for a conceptual tool to recognize differences that can be seen on a continuum of high-conflict.

In Chapter Three an operational definition of high conflict families was adopted that included recognition of both the duration and level of conflict. For example, the duration of the conflict has lasted even with attempts to resolve their divorce issues, either through the judicial system or through other forms of conflict resolution. Parents may have attempted to resolve separation issues, or may be re-litigating past issues. With regard to the level of the conflict, high-conflict parents may continue to have verbal arguments, belittle each other, or verbally, physically or sexually abuse each other. These behaviours may or may not take place in front of the children and represent a continuum of conflict that reflects ongoing interparental hostility.

Using the operational definition of high-conflict delineated in Chapter Three, some of the families involved in the study were in the lower levels of high conflict as they were still unable to effectively communicate with each other after the initial separation period. Other families were at higher levels in the high conflict continuum as ongoing litigation, verbal abuse between the parents and fear of one parent by the other continued after several years of attempts at co-parenting. Of the twelve families, two were designated as being on the lower end of the continuum. Four families were in the middle, and six were situated along the mid to high range of the continuum of high-conflict. Further details of their levels of conflict as well as how they coped with the interparental conflict is discussed on a case by case basis.

The following information provides a review of the information provided by the families involved in this study and is presented on a case by case basis. The interviews

with family members took place during the spring and summer of 2004. Issues related to the parental relationship, the history of conflict, formal and informal helpers as well as the child's adjustment are delineated in these narratives. The child's adjustment refers to the resilient characteristics they appear to exhibit. As discussed earlier, four areas of resilience were used as indicators for resilient behaviour: self-esteem/self-efficacy, social competence, behaviour management, and academic achievement. These areas were each viewed as being on separate domains. Combining these domains allows for an understanding of how the child could be viewed on a continuum of resilience. For example, they may be rated higher on one domain, but lower on another. This would put them at mid-range on the continuum of resilience. Using this language allows for a way of describing behaviour from a narrative perspective.

### ***Family #1***

#### ***Parental Relationship***

The parents were married in 1992 and separated in 2001. Each had been divorced previously and each has one child from an earlier union. Neither parent has a new partner. They had two sons together; one is twelve, the participant in this study, and another, who is eight years of age. Both of these parents are Caucasian. Cultural or religious issues do not appear to be part of the conflict between these parents.

These parents own land outside of the city of Winnipeg that the father continues to farm. While married, the mother worked with the father on the farm. The mother has remained in the marital home on the farm with the children since the separation three years ago.

### History of Conflict

These parents separated because of the mother's allegations that the father had physically abused her for several years. On the night of the separation the mother contacted the police because she was afraid of the father and wanted him removed from the marital home. The police removed the father from the home and charged him with assault. Both parents obtained a peace bond prohibiting any contact between them other than dealing with issues relating to the children. Both children witnessed the parents' physical conflict, as well as the police arresting their father and remember it as the reason for the separation.

Since the separation these parents argue over the phone, particularly with respect to issues relating to the children and financial matters. They have used counselors, lawyers, an assessment through Family Conciliation and the court in an attempt to deal with their ongoing conflict. They continue to litigate over finances as they co-own the family farm and can not seem to find a way to resolve this matter. While the father currently pays child support, he would like to have the amount reduced. The father wants to amend the current court order regarding the time-sharing arrangements that states the mother has primary care of the children with the father having access on Tuesday and Thursday evenings as well as alternate weekends. The father wants more of an equal time-sharing schedule with the children and the mother would like to retain the existing schedule. The time-sharing conflict remains unresolved.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

This family continues to attempt to change the patterns of their communication. Currently they are involved with 'Giving Children Hope', a program designed to provide counseling to various members of high-conflict families. The children are attending the children's group and the parents attend both individual and joint sessions with a family counselor. The mother also attends individual counseling with a psychotherapist in an attempt to help her with some unresolved mental health issues and her feelings about the abuse that took place in the marital relationship.

### Continuum of High conflict

On the continuum of high-conflict, these parents were at a high point during the latter part of their marital relationship with physical abuse taking place in the home. The mother continues to call the police due to perceived harassment from the father towards her. Even with a protection order in place these parents continue to argue a great deal over the phone and in-person at the transition times for the exchange of the children. Although the parents have been separated for three years, the conflict has remained intense. Over the last several months they have attempted to change their communication style through counseling and the conflict has lessened to a lower level on the continuum of high-conflict. However, on the continuum they would still be considered at the mid to high range as they continue to be in litigation and do not communicate directly on most occasions. The mother and father continue to contact the police if they feel the time-sharing agreement or protection order is not being adhered to

as written. As well, the post-separation issues regarding time-sharing and financial matters remain unresolved and before the Court.

### Child's Adjustment

The older boy, the participant in this study, appeared to have more difficulty than his brother adjusting to the interparental conflict. He has had difficulties in school and in completing day-to day tasks since the separation. His mother describes him as having been severely depressed for the first year after the separation. However, over time, with the help of a school counsellor he has been able to complete his school related tasks and maintains his above average grades. This child still appears quite angry that his parents have not been able to resolve their conflict, particularly about the time-sharing arrangements. In discussions with the researcher he stated that he wanted to spend more time with his father and did not understand why he could not do so. For example, he stated,

Last night my dad wanted to pick us up from school, but my mom wouldn't let him. He had to pick us up from daycare. I hate daycare and I'd rather be with my dad. So when my dad came to pick us up he was angry.

At times their child's anger comes out by acting aggressively towards his brother or occasionally being involved in physical altercations at school. He identified his pet dog and his friends as being the ones who helped him survive the difficult times. He describes his peer relationships as being quite important to him. He stated, "I have a couple of good friends from school. I have known them for quite a while and they all know what is happening with me. They help me out".

On a continuum of resilience he would be classified as being on the lower level of the continuum. For example, he was often unable to complete tasks at home. As well, he did not appear to have a high degree of self-esteem and still felt depressed at times. However, he has managed to move forward, albeit slowly, as evidenced by his academic studies and in his socially appropriate conduct with his peers. This positive adaptation is seen despite the high level of ongoing interparental high-conflict.

**Table 1**

**FAMILY #1: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT	RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES
Mid to High Range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Low social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Moderate socially appropriate conduct

***Family #2***

*Parental Relationship*

These parents married in 1991 and separated in 2002. They were divorced as of June 2004. They have two children together, one girl who is ten years of age and a boy who is eight years of age. The oldest child was the participant in this study. Both parents are Caucasian. Neither cultural nor religious issues are a cause of conflict between these parents.

### History of Conflict

These parents separated because they no longer had any common interests. This resulted in little communication. Over time the relationship became one characterized by tense silences and avoidance. The more overt conflict between these parents became prominent after the separation. It consisted of police involvement due to stalking by the father and harassment by each parent towards the other. Child support payments continue to be an issue between these parents. While the father is employed full-time, the mother works on a half-time basis. The father thinks that the mother should be working full-time, and in doing so she would be able to support herself without his child support.

Each parent has a new partner. The mother has her new partner living in the marital home. The father's new partner has two children. She and her children are in the process of moving in with the father.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

After the separation these parents decided upon a joint custody, shared parenting arrangement. The mother has the children with her from Sunday evening until Thursday evening, and the father has the children with him each Thursday evening until Sunday evening. The parents used lawyers, the court and Family Conciliation, specifically the six-hour parent information seminar, in an effort to resolve their differences. While they now have a divorce order outlining the final financial and time-sharing arrangements, they are still unable to communicate effectively about the children and often make arbitrary decisions with respect to the children. For example,

this past summer the father took the children out of the province on a summer holiday for several days longer than had been agreed upon by both parties. While both parents insist that they want to be able to communicate more effectively, they are uncertain as to how to do so. They are currently looking into possible counseling options, for both themselves and the children.

### Continuum of Conflict

On the continuum of high conflict these parents could be classified as a lower level of high conflict as they continue to argue about the children's time-sharing schedule and child support issues after eighteen months into their separation. While they did not engage in overt conflict during their marital relationship, the conflict intensified after the separation and has continued since that time, moving the relationship into a high-conflict situation. For example, shortly after the separation, the mother filed harassment charges against the father. She stated,

It became a horrible situation after the separation. He (the father) would phone me and leave me these mean messages on my phone for the children to hear. He started waiting for me to get off of work and following me home. I know it was to check out how many hours I was working, because he does not think he should be paying child support.

As well, the father does not always follow the time-sharing schedule. For example, he will keep the children longer than had been previously agreed or make arbitrary changes to the schedule. This continues to lead to arguments between the parents and calls to the lawyers.

### Child's Adjustment

Since the separation the children have managed to carry on with their day-to-day tasks. They continue to do well with in school and in their extra-curricular activities. They were quite surprised when their parents separated, as they did not suspect anything was wrong in their family. They enjoy spending time with their parents and appear to get along well with their new stepparents.

The child who was the research participant from this family appears to exhibit a great deal of resiliency. She stated that although she is quite aware of the problems between her parents, she is able to distract herself with her activities and friends. She does well at school and in her extra-curricular activities, particularly swimming. She enjoys spending time with both her parents, and has become quite attached to her new stepfather. She also stated that she "liked her father's new girlfriend, but wasn't sure if she wanted this woman to move in with her father". She does not appear to have any behaviour problems and is able to attend to day-to-day tasks both at home and at school. On the continuum of resilience she appears to exhibit many resilient characteristics.

**Table 2**

#### **FAMILY #2: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Low range of high-conflict	Moderate Self-esteem
	High Academic Achievement
	High Social Competence
	Socially Appropriate Conduct

### *Family #3*

#### *Parental Relationship*

These parents lived common law for a short period of time and then separated in 1996. They were young when they began their relationship and soon realized it was not going to work for them. During the relationship between the parents there was some arguing, but no other form of conflict. The daughter born to them is nine years of age and the participant in this study. She was only six months old when these parents first separated. The final separation occurred shortly after her first birthday.

Both of these parents are Caucasian. The mother speaks of her cultural background, Ukrainian, as being important to both her and her extended family.

#### *History of Conflict*

From early in the separation the mother was granted primary care and control of the child. The father was spending time with his daughter every second weekend and a few evenings each week. However, this changed after a few years, as there was increased conflict between the parents. On numerous occasions the child witnessed her parents arguing over the phone and in-person at the transition times. Eventually over the years, the child refused to see her father on a regular basis and at this point will only see him on holidays and for her birthday.

Since the separation, both of these parents have married other partners and each has another child from these marriages. The mother lives in Winnipeg and the father lives in a smaller community in rural Manitoba. Both parents work on a full-time basis

outside of the home. The father works in the health care system and the mother works in administration. The father pays child support.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

This family has used various means in an attempt to resolve their conflict. They have asked family friends to communicate for them, had a school counselor work with their child, used lawyers to act for them, and finally went to court for an order with respect to time-sharing and child support issues. They also recently attempted family-related mediation through Family Conciliation in an effort to have a neutral party help them to understand their child's uneasiness about seeing her father on a more regular basis. They began this process and met together on two occasions with the mediator. Their daughter met with the mediator and then together with the father and the mediator. The father became disheartened, as these meetings did not appear to change the way access took place. As a result he decided not to continue to use this intervention. He felt nothing more could alter the way his daughter thought about him. Currently the father is not making any demands of the child and is resigned to see her on a few holidays throughout the year.

### Continuum of Conflict

On the continuum of high conflict, these parents were not in high conflict until the time of the separation. Since shortly after the separation they have been litigating with respect to time-sharing between the child and her father, with the father demanding more access from the mother. This pattern of conflict puts them mid-range along the

continuum of high-conflict as this has continued for several years. Recently they have come to some resolution with respect to access issues, thereby lessening the conflict and putting them on a lower level on the continuum of high conflict. While there is currently no overt conflict between them regarding time-sharing issues, there are still outstanding child support issues. For example, the father is often late with his monthly maintenance payments. These parents have been separated for eight years and continue to be unable to communicate effectively about child-related issues. When they attempt to communicate it often ends in an argument or the mother hanging up the phone to avoid an argument. This would suggest that they continue to be situated on the continuum of high conflict, albeit at the lower end of it.

#### Child's Adjustment

The child does not remember living with both her parents, as she was quite young when they were together. However, she does remember the post-separation conflict between them. She blames her father for any distress suffered by her mother. For example, she recalls phone calls between her parents that made her mother cry. The child continues to be emotionally affected by the interparental conflict, particularly issues related to access between her and her father. For example, she often becomes depressed and uninterested in school after her father calls her to request a visit. This child considers her newly blended family with her mother, stepfather and new sister as her family. She talks about how much she admires her stepfather and considers him to be her 'father'.

This child exhibits some resilient characteristics. She does well academically and is involved in extra-curricular activities. For example, she is a good dancer and looks forward to continuing with her classes. She also thoroughly enjoys being with her best friend and spending time with her mother and stepfather's relatives. However, she states that she does not always feel good about herself and sometimes has trouble getting up to go to school. Her mother also states that the child is sometimes depressed, but usually around the time of her father's visits. On the continuum of resiliency, she would appear to be in the mid-range, exhibiting characteristics that appear high in two domains, but having difficulty maintaining her self-esteem and social competence.

**Table 3**

**FAMILY #3: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Mid range of high-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Low to moderate social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Socially appropriate conduct

## ***Family #4***

### *Parental Relationship*

These parents started dating and were in a common law relationship from 1991 until their separation in 1997. Their daughter, the participant in this project, is nine years of age. Both of these parents are Caucasian with no particular cultural affiliation.

### *History of Conflict*

These parents separated due to physical abuse by the father towards the mother. As the child was only two at the time of the separation, she does not recall her parents living together or any abuse occurring between her father and mother. However, she does know that her parents have always argued a great deal and continue to dislike each other. She talked about continuing to hear them argue over the phone. She would feel afraid when that occurred, go to her room and turn on her radio. She stated that she has heard her mother say, "I wish your father was dead".

Since the separation, the child has been in her mother's primary care. The mother has sole custody and the father had regular access with his daughter. There were some variations and gradual increases to access resulting in the following schedule in 1999: the father had his daughter with him on alternate weekends and every Wednesday evening. The child was also with her father for half the time on holidays, i.e., summer and Christmas. This arrangement was in place until early 2003. At that time the father was unable to exercise his access as he was arrested for physical assault of his new partner. The mother refused him any further access to their child at that time.

Since the separation both parents have had new partners for several years. However, the father and his new partner separated in 2003 at the time of the arrest. The father served six months on the assault charge and was then on probation for eighteen months. The child recalls her father hitting her stepmother on many occasions. She talked about how much she now misses her stepmother due to the separation. For example, she recalled the emotional closeness she felt towards her stepmother and how she often feared that her stepmother would be hurt during arguments between her stepmother and father.

#### Formal and Informal Helpers

The mother and father have recently been involved with Family Conciliation and had a court-ordered family assessment completed with respect to the child having unsupervised access to her father. Since their separation they have been in court on numerous occasions in an attempt to resolve issues with respect to time-sharing and child support payments. The mother states that the father continues to be late with his monthly maintenance payments. As well, he owes several months in arrears. There is another court date pending to deal with these financial issues. They have also spent a great deal of money and time with lawyers in an attempt to develop a new agreement with respect to time-sharing arrangements. There is still a difference of opinion between these parents as to whether the father should have unsupervised access to the child. This issue remains unresolved.

### Continuum of Conflict

On the continuum of high conflict these parents could be classified as being on a higher level. Initially the physical abuse by the father towards the mother signified a higher level of conflict. Although this physical abuse did not continue after the separation, the conflict continued as the father withheld child support payments on a regular basis and the parents continued to argue about time-sharing issues. In 2003 the conflict intensified, as the mother no longer felt the father was fit to have unsupervised access with their daughter. Throughout the separation of seven years, these parents have had patterns of continuing conflict. While the level of ongoing conflict has fluctuated, it is currently back to the higher range of the continuum due to the ongoing litigation and unresolved time-sharing issues.

### Child's Adjustment

With respect to resilient attributes, the child in this study exhibited good social competence, i.e., the ability to do her homework and chores. She also does well academically in school and enjoys time with her friends. For example, she stated that "she gets good reports cards" and "school is a fun place because I get to spend time with my friends and I like art and gym". Both her teacher and her mother stated that she rarely has disagreements with friends or family members. The child stated, "I am close to my aunts and cousins. They just live a few blocks away. I also have three good friends and one special friend, Victoria. We get along and never fight".

While this child presented as quite shy and reserved, she was able to talk about her fear of her father's anger and feelings of loss with respect to the relationship with

her stepmother. Since her father and stepmother separated over a year ago, she has only seen her stepmother on one occasion. On the continuum of resilience, this child presented as exhibiting many resilient attributes, but is also grieving the loss of her stepmother, which has left her feeling sad and somewhat depressed at times.

**Table 4**

**FAMILY #4: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT	RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES
High range of High-conflict	Low to moderate self-esteem
	High social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Socially appropriate conduct

***Family #5***

*Parental Relationship*

These parents met in 1990 in Winnipeg, Manitoba while taking English as Second Language classes. They had both recently immigrated to Canada from Poland. From discussions with both parents, they agree the marriage several months after they met in Canada in order to facilitate the mother's landed immigrant status, as her visitor's visa was about to expire. They had one child together, a son, now twelve years of age, who is the participant in this study. Despite immigrating from Poland, the parents are from different European cultures. The parents have strong views relating to

their individual ethnic origins and both suggest that this is one of the main reasons for their conflict as they have divergent ideas on many topics.

### History of Conflict

The parents separated in 1996 after many years of discord, arguing about all aspects of parenting and family life. At the time of the separation the mother went to a women's shelter with the child. Although there weren't any medical evidence or police reports, the mother alleges that the father repeatedly threatened her with physical violence that escalated to an incident of being physically abused just prior to the separation.

The mother stated,

We were married for two years and everything changed after I got pregnant. And I know that was caused by his control issues. I finally left the relationship when our child was four years old and was in contact with Osborne House, a place to go when you are worried about being abused. Somehow I got the information that they have people willing to listen or help. And that's what they were telling me. Like I learned all about his abuse cycle and controlling issues. And I knew it got to the point where it was getting physical.

The child remembers hearing his parents repeatedly argue with each other, both before and since the separation. He stated,

When my parents argue I try to stop them sometimes. Like I won't talk to each one of them. Sometimes I just wait until everything stops. And sometimes if my mom's hurt I'll try to make her feel better. So, that's usually the case when a fight happens when I am at my mom's.

Since the separation these parents have engaged in a great deal of litigation. As of 2004, the court file held over one hundred and twenty documents that reflected the conflicted and litigious nature of their dispute. For the first year and a half after the separation, the child lived with his mother and spent alternate weekends with his father.

The current time-sharing arrangement, achieved through mediation in 2003, is one of joint custody with the child in the care of the mother approximately 70% of the time and in the care of the father the other 30% of the time. However, the father wants to again change this arrangement and is planning on going back to court to do so. He wants to move to a shared parenting model of care with the child living with both parents on an equal basis. The mother wants to maintain the current time-sharing arrangement.

Both parents are remarried. The father remarried a few years ago. He went back to his country of origin and brought his new wife home with him. He did not tell his son he was re-married until he returned home with his wife. The mother remarried five years ago. Neither parent has any other children. The child talked about getting along well with his stepfather, but not with his stepmother.

Both parents work on a full-time basis. The father pays child support to the mother.

### *Continuum of Conflict*

On the continuum of high conflict these parents would be classified in the mid to high-range. The marital relationship was filled with discord that had continued over many years of the separation. At the time of the separation there were threats of physical abuse by the father towards the mother. Although there is now some communication between them, they are still in disagreement on many issues concerning their child and plan to continue with litigation. The overt conflict may have lessened somewhat over the years, but they still do not agree on many parenting issues, including the post-separation time-sharing arrangement.

### Child's Adjustment

Initially the child suffered from bouts of depression and anger following the separation. Eventually he spent several months with a therapist working through some of his feelings about his situation. He is now able to talk about his feelings towards his parents, their differences and how he copes with the ongoing conflict between them.

This child exhibits different levels on the four domains of resiliency. For example, he talks about still feeling depressed at times, but is able to carry on with his required tasks both at school and at home. He enjoys spending time with both his parents, but has difficulty understanding his father's rules. He does not have enough self-confidence to question his father about them. While he enjoys school and attempts to do his best, he often has difficulty concentrating and completing his homework. He has good relationships with his peers, but does not like to be in any conflict with them. He will not engage in arguments with his peers or with his parents. While this behaviour implies that he exhibits socially appropriate conduct, it also questions how he will be able to manage his anger in the future. Avoiding conflict does not allow him to resolve it.

**Table 5**

#### **FAMILY #5: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Mid to High range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Low social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Socially appropriate conduct

## *Family #6*

### *Parental Relationship*

The parents lived in a common law relationship from 1994 until they separated in 2002. The mother had a daughter, who is now fifteen years old, from a previous relationship. Together they had a daughter, now nine years of age and the participant in this study. They separated partially due to problems between the father and older daughter. As she became a teenager, the family dynamics changed with the mother siding with the older daughter against the father. Eventually this caused a rift between the father and mother with the mother finally deciding to leave the relationship. The older child also left with the mother.

The mother is Aboriginal. The father states that he does not have a particular cultural affiliation, but his parents are Ukrainian. However, these cultural differences did not appear to play a part in the conflict either before or since the separation. The younger child does not identify herself as Metis. When asked about her cultural orientation she stated that she had a Ukrainian background.

The father is currently on disability as he has recently had an operation on his back. However, he is still able to provide appropriate day to day care for his child. He plans to go back to full-time employment within the next year. He is not in a new relationship. The mother works on a full-time basis. She now lives with her new partner and her oldest child. Neither parent pays child support.

### History of Conflict

These parents argued a great deal around the time of the separation, often about the older child. The younger child witnessed much of this conflict and did not like it.

The father stated,

She (the younger child) told us she did not like it when we argued. It was unusual for her to tell us something like that. She wasn't used to hearing us argue, but I do admit that there was a lot of ugly yelling and screaming and conflict between her mother and myself.

When asked about the conflict between her parents the child stated,

They argued sometimes. They also argued some after the separation, but not as much. I don't really know what they were arguing about. I just tried to close my door and not listen. My sister would go into her room too when they argued. Now they don't talk in person or on the phone. They don't talk at all.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

Since the separation these parents have been to court in an attempt to resolve both the financial and time-sharing issues with respect to the younger daughter. The daughter was seeing both her parents on an equal basis for the first six months following the separation. However, this changed as the mother moved to a different community and the daughter wanted to stay with her father in her familiar home, school and surroundings. The father now has primary care of the child and the mother sees the child three weekends out of each month. The mother is still contesting this arrangement, as she wants to see more of her daughter. These parents have used the court, child related assessments and lawyers in an attempt to resolve their conflict. They do not have any direct communication at this time. They use their lawyers to communicate about any necessary changes to their schedules.

### Continuum of Conflict

On the continuum of high conflict, these parents could be classified as in the mid-range. While there was discord in the household before the separation, it largely centered upon the adolescent and stepfather relationship. There was overt pre- and post-separation conflict. There was also a great deal of litigation over the first two years of the separation. This would suggest that these parents were in the higher range of the high-conflict scale at that time. Since the separation the parents have found ways to minimize the conflict in front of their child and are working towards a resolution of the outstanding issues. However, they still communicate through their lawyers and both parents want the time-sharing schedule changed again. The mother wants more time with her daughter and the father wants the child to have more of a voice in the arrangements. He states the child has told him she only wants to be with her mother for two weekends each month, instead of the three that she now spends with her mother. While they are still in a high-conflict situation they have moved to the mid-range of the continuum.

### Child's Adjustment

The nine-year old daughter remembers hearing her parents argue both before and after the separation. She went to her paternal grandmother for comfort at times when she became frightened by the arguing. Her strongest external support continues to be her paternal grandmother. Apparently the grandmother comes to her father's home on a regular basis throughout the week to spend time with her grandchild and assist with household and child-care tasks. Currently the child is doing extremely well

academically and in extra-curricular activities. For example, she has recently been chosen to be in the school choir. She also enjoys her peers and often has friends over to her house.

This child presented as quite shy. For example, she had difficulty answering some questions and communicated more effectively when she was also drawing or playing. However, throughout her interview, she was able to talk about her passions that included spending time with her friends and being with her grandmother. She stated that she likes school and works hard in her classes. She also enjoys helping her father with household chores. She states that she has a better relationship with her sister now that they no longer live in the same house and enjoys spending time with her when she visits her mother. This child appears to have the ability to discuss her needs with others, as she was able to convince both her parents that the initial time-sharing arrangement did not suit her needs. They were able to understand her concerns and changed it accordingly. She appears to exhibit many resilient attributes, particularly social competence, self-efficacy and academic achievement.

**Table 6**

**FAMILY #6: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT	RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES
Mid range of High-conflict	Moderate self-esteem
	High academic achievement
	High social competence
	Socially appropriate conduct

## *Family #7*

### *Parental Relationship*

The parents married in 1989 and separated in 2002. According to the mother they separated the first time in 2001 for a few months due to a lack of communication and no further common interests. In 2002 the final separation occurred when the mother found out the father was sexually involved with someone at his workplace. Both parents disclosed being quite depressed at various stages of the separation, having suicidal thoughts and needing to seek outside help.

These parents had one son together. He is currently twelve years of age, and the participant in this study. Both these parents identify themselves as Caucasian. Neither cultural nor religious issues appear to be a part in the conflict between these parents.

The father continued in his new relationship. He now has an infant daughter from this relationship. The mother is not in a new relationship.

### *History of Conflict*

Since the separation there has been a great deal of conflict. The mother contends that the father was verbally abusive toward her on a regular basis and that this has continued since the separation. As well, she indicated that he has gone to extreme measures in his efforts to harass her. For example, after the separation the father broke into the mother's garage and tapped her phone lines. They now only communicate through their lawyers. They have been to court on numerous occasions putting forward motions to either change access arrangements or attempt to deal with financial matters. Since the separation Winnipeg Child and Family Services, the local child protection

agency, has been asked to intervene by the mother, as she has been concerned about the stepmother's parenting skills.

The mother has primary care of the child but the father spends time with him Tuesday and Thursday evenings as well as every Saturday to Sunday. On Fridays he spends the overnight with his paternal grandparents.

The mother works on a part-time basis and the father works on a full-time basis. The father pays child support.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

Since the separation the child has been to a child psychologist for an assessment as he exhibited feelings of anger and frustration at the beginning of the separation. He was quite angry with his father because of his father's new relationship as he felt that his mother was suffering because of it. Over the past several months, the child has been involved in an educational/therapeutic group for children from separated families. Gradually over the past year the child seems to be exhibiting less anger and is able to talk to his mother about his feelings with respect to the separation.

Both parents are now considering mediation as an alternative to further litigation. However, there continues to be a great deal of animosity between them, often fueled by the stepmother. For example, the stepmother writes letters to the mother telling her how much she loves the father.

### Continuum of Conflict

On the continuum of high-conflict, these parents would be in the mid to high-range. They have been involved in litigation from the time of the separation and continue to only be able to communicate effectively through their lawyers. There have been calls to the Winnipeg Child and Family Services, the local child welfare agency and concerns about verbal and emotional abuse by the father and his new partner. While these parents understand the need for a different approach to communication, (e.g., through mediation) they have been unable to do so. They continue to react to situations that arise by blaming the other parent. They have not changed the way they interact since the separation. At times the conflict has intensified with the stepmother now playing a part in exacerbating it. This would suggest these parents are still at a mid to high range on the continuum of high conflict.

### Child's Adjustment

The child presents as having a great deal of self-esteem. He is able to articulate his feelings and the reasons for them. However, he states that he does not like conflict and gets anxious when his parents argue. He copes by giving in to his father's demands and going along with the status quo. At school, he has a lot of friends. His teacher states that this boy is a leader, does extremely well academically and is a positive role model. For example, he will make friends with children that are shy or need help in their studies. Initially after the separation this child struggled to maintain his equilibrium and needed the help of a counselor and his teacher as he attempted to cope with the difficulties between his parents. He also used listening to music as a place of

refuge. He stated, "Listening to music really helped me get through the tough times". He also feels that his parents' separation has been good for him. He stated, "now I can have my friends over at my mom's whenever I want, because my dad never let me do that".

At the present time this child exhibits many resilient attributes. This suggests that he was able to make use of his external support systems in order to cope and bounce back from the difficult separation and ongoing conflict between his parents.

**Table 7**

**FAMILY #7: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Mid to High range of High-conflict	Moderate self-esteem
	High academic achievement
	Moderate social competence
	Socially appropriate conduct

***Family #8***

*Parental Relationship*

These parents met in school and started living together in 1992. They separated in 1998 due to increasing physical altercations between them. The father has custody of their eldest child, a daughter, upon the request of the mother. She is now eleven years of age and the participant of this study. These parents also had two boys together who are in the custody of their mother.

The father is in a new relationship. He has a child with his new partner. The stepmother has two children from a previous marriage who are now part of this newly blended family. The father works on a full-time basis, often taking on extra shifts in an effort to support his family. The stepmother does not work outside the home. She provides the majority of the care of the three children.

### History of Conflict

Both parents are Aboriginal. They met and lived on the same reserve while they were married. Apparently both extended families have played a large part in the conflict as various members of the reserve have taken sides against each parent. This has resulted in arguments within that community on many occasions. Shortly after the separation the father moved off the reserve and into Winnipeg. He believes this has helped to reduce the conflict. The mother continues to live on the reserve with her new partner.

The mother no longer has any access to the daughter and the father does not see his sons. While both parents state they want to see all their respective children, they seem unable to make it happen. This lack of access is partially due to the parents' inability to communicate with each other. As well, the father is uncertain whether the mother should have access with their daughter, thereby not wanting to initiate any change to the current situation.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

These parents have used various methods in an attempt to resolve their conflict. Winnipeg Child and Family Services, the local child welfare agency, was involved with the family due to allegations that the mother had physically abused the daughter. There appeared to be no physical evidence of this abuse, but the daughter claims that her mother hit her and locked her in the closet on a few occasions. These parents also had a court ordered assessment completed by a counselor at Family Conciliation. Using information gained from this assessment they later settled on the matter of custody and access through their lawyers who helped them negotiate a time-sharing plan. This plan was then made into a court order.

The child involved in this study has some developmental delays. She works with a resource teacher through her school and does school work at home on a regular basis. According to her school counselor she has the label of 'special education student'. She works at two grade levels below her age level. This family has a respite worker at home to help them with blended family issues and work with the child on an individual basis. Despite an academic handicap this child was able to articulate her feelings with respect to her family, peers and school.

### Continuum of Conflict

While the outstanding issues of custody and access with respect to all the children have been decided upon through the various legal proceedings, the daughter is unable to see her mother and the sons are unable to see their father. This is due to ongoing interparental conflict and an inability by the parents to effectively

communicate without becoming involved in verbal arguments. This reflects the parents' inability to move beyond their personal distrust and dislike of each other and look foremost at the children's needs to have an ongoing relationship with both parents. On the continuum of interparental conflict this represents a higher level of conflict as the conflict directly impedes the children's ability to have a relationship with the other parent. Even though the parents have resolved their post-separation issues on paper through a court order it has not helped them to move beyond the conflict that led them initially to need outside intervention.

#### *Child's Adjustment*

The child talked about how much she relies on her stepmother for both her emotional and physical needs. She stated that the person she would also turn to first for anything she needed was her stepmother.

The participating child from this family appears to exhibit varying amounts of resiliency. Her developmental delays do not allow her to have the appropriate academic achievement for her age. However, despite the ongoing interparental conflict and lack of access to her mother she is able to exhibit socially competence as well as enjoy time with her family. According to her teacher she is well liked at school and has friends. Although she does not demonstrate a great deal of self-esteem in that she has difficulty articulating her needs and desires, she is able to exhibit a feeling of contentment to those around her. From both her description and that of her stepmother, it is clear that she derives a great deal of emotional support and security from her relationship with her

stepmother. For example, she stated, "my stepmother has been the most helpful person to her since the separation".

**Table 8**

**FAMILY #8: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Mid to High range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Moderate social competence
	Low academic achievement
	Socially appropriate conduct

***Family #9***

*Parental Relationship*

This family consists of two parents who never married and only lived together for eight months in 1991. After the mother became pregnant she left the father and moved to her home province of New Brunswick. The father went and visited the mother during her pregnancy and was physically abusive towards her. He left soon after the child's birth in 1992 and did not see his son until 2000 when the mother requested child support payments. The father then decided he wanted a relationship with his son. The mother stated,

The father first showed up when our son was in grade one. I hadn't yet decided whether to tell our son that this man was his father. But everything seemed okay. Then his father said that his whole reason for coming was because maintenance enforcement had caught up with him and was making him pay child support. So he came once and then he didn't come for quite awhile again.

The father now lives in British Columbia and the mother resides in Manitoba. Since 2000 the child has visited his father in British Columbia on two occasions. The second visit resulted in the boy witnessing oral sex between his teenage cousins. When he told his father about this incident, his father did not believe him. Since that time he no longer feels safe going to his father's home, but still wants a relationship with his father. Over the past four years his father has come to Manitoba approximately three times to visit with his son and calls him roughly six times each year.

The mother remarried in 2000 and has had another son. It is unknown whether the father is in a new relationship.

#### History of Conflict

Both parents are Caucasian. Cultural issues do not appear to play a part in the conflict between these parents. Instead the geographical distance between them restricts the access between the child and the father. This leads to conflict between the parents, as the child is often disappointed when the father does not phone or visit him. The mother then contacts the father and they argue about this matter.

#### Formal and Informal Helpers

Witnessing the sexual incident between his cousins has left the child with an inability to understand his own sexuality. This particular incident and the problematical relationship with his father appear to be tied together. Examples of emotional difficulties arising from the incident have included nightmares and an increased inability to trust new situations. In an effort to help him deal with this issue, his mother

has accompanied him to counseling on several occasions. The stepfather has also been involved in this family counseling. As well the child has met individually with a counselor in order to deal with his fears and questions about this incident. While he continues to question why his father did not believe him, he still wants a relationship with his father and wishes his father would come to visit him in Manitoba as he does not feel safe at his father's home. When discussing his family, this child regards his stepfather, instead of his biological father, as his 'father' and would turn to his stepfather or his mother if he needed any type of help. He talks about his stepfather as "someone great in his life because he never had a dad before".

### Continuum of Conflict

The conflict between these parents was intense at the time of the separation; physical abuse occurred and the mother moved to a different province. This suggests a high level of conflict on the continuum of high conflict. During the four year period while the parents had no contact there was no overt conflict. When the contact began again, so did the conflict. There has been a great deal of litigation, mostly due to the father's unwillingness to pay child support. This continues to be an issue. The mother can no longer afford to go back to court to deal with this matter. Therefore, this issue remains outstanding, as the father will not pay his maintenance unless there is ongoing pressure brought to bear from a judge demanding that he do so. Due to this unresolved issue and other issues the parents disagree on with respect to the son, (e.g., what the child witnessed the last time he was in the father's home) the conflict remains high between these parents. In the past the mother has attempted to communicate via phone

or letter. However, she has not been successful in changing the communication patterns or the father's willingness to see his son on a regular basis. The high conflict between these parents continues even though the separation occurred many years ago and they were only together for a short period of time.

Child's Adjustment

The child exhibits some resilient characteristics. He has average grades at school and is involved in extra-curricular activities at school, e.g., peer conflict manager. He felt that he could better understand how to manage conflict and understand why his parents still argue if he took on the role of conflict manager with his peers at school. He states that he "has lots of friends and tries to be nice to everyone". However, he does not have a good self-concept and has trouble accepting his own sexuality. Even though he has had to struggle in his relationship with his father, he feels secure with his mother and stepfather. He states that the security he feels from these two primary relationships have allowed him to "get through the day".

**Table 9**

**FAMILY #9: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
High range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Moderate social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Socially appropriate conduct

## ***Family #10***

### *Parental Relationship*

The parents married in May of 1995 and separated for the first time in late 1997 due to the father's involvement in an extra-marital relationship. The parents reconciled for several months and went for counseling in an attempt to strengthen their marriage. They finally separated in 1998, as they could not find a way to move forward in their relationship. They had two children together, a boy who is eight years old, and a girl, who is nine years old and the participant in this study. Since the separation both parents have established new relationships.

The father works full-time in law enforcement. The mother does not work outside the home. The father pays child support. Cultural issues do not appear to play a part in the conflict between these parents and both parents are Caucasian.

### *History of Conflict*

Since the separation there has been a great deal of conflict between the parents regarding the children. This conflict has taken many forms. For the first year the father was not seeing much of the children even though there was a court order in place granting the father access three to four times each week. During this period of time the father refused to speak with the mother, thereby making arrangements for access difficult. This led to the father communicating through the children. Eventually after many problems with transitions between the homes, this matter was taken back to court. Although a different court order was issued that allowed the father access every second weekend and once during the week to cut down on the difficulties in transitions, the

father did not see the children as much as he was allowed. However, when he became involved with his new partner this changed. He began seeing the children on a regular basis and the daughter became quite attached to her stepmother.

The mother has an older child, a teenager from a previous relationship. As well she has had a child with her new partner. The father has recently separated from his new partner of seven years. The stepmother had a child from a previous relationship approximately the same age as the child participating in the study. These children formed a close relationship and spent a great deal of time with each other when the child spent time in her father's home. The child also reported having a strong attachment to her stepmother. Before her father and stepmother separated, the child was doing well, academically and socially. She did not exhibit any behaviour problems. At times she had difficulty adjusting to the differences in the two households but had grown used to changing her routines if necessary. Currently, the child, who is a participant in this study, is having a difficult time adjusting to the loss of her stepsister and her stepmother, and is grieving for the members of her blended family. She is having a difficult time in her studies at school and in managing her behaviour at home.

#### *Formal and Informal Helpers*

The conflict between these parents has continued mostly due to the inability to communicate directly and effectively with each other. In the past they have attempted to resolve their issues through family-related mediation. Currently they are in the process of attempting mediation once again. Apparently the recent separation of the father has changed how and when he can see the children. He wants to change his time-

sharing arrangements and is willing to do so through mediation. This indicates a willingness to work towards a resolution of the conflict.

### *Continuum of Conflict*

These parents have been in varying degrees of conflict since the separation six years ago. While they have attempted various ways of resolving their conflict, they have been unable to resolve it over the years. Due to the length of the conflict and the outstanding issues this would suggest they are still at the mid-range on the continuum of high-conflict. However, they are attempting to deal with their co-parenting relationship in an effort to find better ways of communicating with each other.

### *Child's Adjustment*

Within the previously outlined domains of resilience, this child exhibited many positive characteristics over the six years that these parents have been separated. For example, she was able to form positive trusting relationships with new family members and feel good about herself and her family. She stated that, "I feel good about myself when I help my teachers and my mom and dad". As well, she enjoyed positive relationships with her peers and excelled in her extra-curricular activities. However, since the recent separation between the father and stepmother, she has exhibited far fewer resilient attributes. For example, she is having difficulties in her academic studies and appears to have a lower self-esteem. She stated that, "she feels all messed up now because my dad doesn't live with my stepmother anymore". This would suggest

that she has been unable to access her resilient characteristics due to the loss of extended family members, i.e., her stepmother and stepsister.

**Table 10**

**FAMILY #10: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT	RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES
Mid to High range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Moderate social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Difficulty with socially appropriate behaviour

***Family #11***

***Parental Relationship***

These parents lived in a common law relationship for approximately four years before separating in 1994. The mother left the father because he was physically abusing her. They had one child together, a daughter, who is now ten years of age. Both parents are Caucasian.

The mother has been in a new common law relationship for the past seven years. She and her new partner have a child together, now three years of age. It is unknown whether the father is in a new relationship. The mother does not work outside the home and the stepfather is in a low paying job. The mother and her blended family live in

subsidized housing. She states that some of the child's peers from the housing development are a bad influence on her.

### History of Conflict

Approximately two years after the separation the father stopped seeing the daughter and did not attempt to do so until two years ago. This was the same time the mother went to court and filed for child support. The parents then became embroiled in litigation with respect to this matter and the court ordered an assessment by an independent evaluator as the judge needed help deciding if access should be reinstated. Eventually the court ordered that the father have access to the daughter every second weekend. This access arrangement continued for approximately eighteen months until the father abruptly stopped visitation without any explanation. He has not seen the child since that time. He has also stopped paying child support.

### Formal and Informal Helpers

The mother has always been concerned about any access between the father and child. Simply stopping access without an explanation convinced her that he was not sincere in wanting an ongoing relationship with their child. This has left the child to deal with the loss of her father for the second time. The child has a close relationship with her stepfather and other extended family members that have provided her with an ongoing sense of security. However, both the child and her mother report that the child has feelings of anger and frustration about her father's disappearance.

The mother has attempted to help the child deal with her current situation. She enrolled her in a supportive peer group at her school. This group format was somewhat helpful to the child as it taught her how to deal with situations that required problem solving or talking about issues. However, the child continues to exhibit some behaviour problems and at times regresses to earlier stages of behaviour including temper tantrums.

### Continuum of Conflict

These parents have been unable to move past their distrust of each other. Even though they did not have any contact with each other for several years, they were unable to change the way they felt at the time of the separation. This has resulted in a great deal of litigation over the past few years. Although there was no contact between them for several years they would be considered to be a high-conflict family. Evidence of this is seen in how they quickly reverted back to their destructive ways of communication when the contact re-commenced eight years later. Even though there is no communication or contact between these parents at this time, they would still be considered at the mid-range of the high-conflict continuum. Should contact between them begin again, it is likely that they will once again be involved in litigation with respect to time-sharing and child support issues. Nothing appears to have been resolved over the past two years, even with the help of the court. The mother stated,

I don't agree that he should have access to our daughter. The court told me that every child has the right to know their parent and decided against my wishes. But now he hasn't seen her for several months. If he shows up again, I will fight the court order allowing access because he shouldn't be seeing our child.

Child's Adjustment

The child has been able to use her resilient attributes even in the face of the interparental adversarial conflict over the past few years. For example, she had average grades at school, helped with the new baby at home and had socially appropriate behaviour both at school and in the home. However, when her father stopped visiting her, the behaviour changed. She was unable to maintain her equilibrium and lost self-esteem. For example, she was socially inappropriate with her sister and with her peers. Her grades at school were below average and she had difficulty interacting with family members. However, she was able to use her relationship with her family to cope with some of the changes. She stated, "I feel good when I am able to spend time with my family, especially my mother and stepfather".

**Table 11**

**FAMILY #11: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Mid range of High-conflict	Low self-esteem
	Low social competence
	Below average academic achievement
	Difficulty with socially appropriate behaviour

## *Family #12*

### *Parental Relationship*

The parents began dating at a young age, in 1987. They married in 1993 and stayed together until 1996. They separated due to a great deal of arguing about finances and extended family influences. They had two children together, a daughter, now eleven, and the participant in this study, and a son, who is eight years of age. Both parents are remarried. The mother remarried in 1997 and the father in 2001. Neither parent has children from their remarriages.

Both parents work on a full-time basis. The father pays child support to the mother. Both parents identify themselves as Caucasian. Neither culture nor religion appears to play a part in the conflict between these parents.

### *History of Conflict*

During the early post separation stage these parents were able to come to some resolution with respect to the time-sharing arrangements, with each parent having the children for approximately half the time. However, this arrangement deteriorated when the mother remarried shortly after the divorce. Since that time there has been conflict between the parents to a varying degree. At times they are able to communicate by phone or in person. At other times they are unable to communicate at all and resort to being disrespectful and arguing with each other. This type of conflict has continued for several years. In the past they used their lawyers to help them design a time-sharing arrangement. As well, shortly after the separation, the father participated in individual

counseling in an attempt to help him find tools to resolve the interparental conflict. The father discussed how he viewed the conflict between he and the mother.

We used lawyers. We tried to work it out on our own, but in all fairness there were issues that (the mother) couldn't let go. She wanted to be in control of the whole situation so she wanted me to say yes to whatever she was saying because it made sense for her but it wasn't working for me. When I remarried it didn't work for my family anymore either. So it took two lawyers. My lawyer cost me nothing because he was very generous about my situation. Her lawyer cost her quite a bit. So that for her was the resolution. Finding out how much her lawyer was going to cost got her to sit down like adults and start working things out on our own. That's how she resolved it because she couldn't afford to go through court or spend much on her lawyer.

Currently the father shares time with the children on alternate weekends and one evening during the week. As well, he has the children with him on half of all the holidays, including one month in the summer. Due to the ongoing contact of access by both parents, the children have a strong relationship with their stepparents and extended family members.

#### Formal and Informal Helpers

Recently the father has taken the parenting seminar offered through Family Conciliation and found it quite helpful. The mother will be taking it in the near future. They hope this seminar will give them additional tools to help manage the sporadic conflict that continues to be part of their co-parenting arrangement.

#### Continuum of Conflict

While these parents have not engaged in overt conflict over the years, they continue to argue and have demonstrated an inability to resolve their differences with respect to the children. This has been ongoing since the separation eight years ago. This

suggests that they continue to be high-conflict family, albeit at the lower end of the continuum.

### Child's Adjustment

The oldest child, the participant in this study, does extremely well academically and enjoys her time with both parents. She feels that living in two different homes is quite normal, as many of her friends have parents that are separated and have had many of the same experiences as her. However, she talks about being upset and afraid when her parents have serious arguments.

The child appears to exhibit strong resilient characteristics. She does extremely well academically, has a strong self-concept and is socially competent. For example, she is able to talk openly with both parents about her requirements for equitable time with family members, when she feels that her needs are not taken into account. She stated that she "enjoys having two different homes as it gives her two spaces to call her own". She enjoys her time with her friends and extended family members. However, due to the distance between the parent's homes, she does not spend time with her friends when she is in her father's home. She states that her step-grandparents are extremely important to her in that she gains a great deal of satisfaction, security and fun from her relationships with them.

**Table 12**

**FAMILY #12: Rating of Interparental Conflict and Child's Resilience**

<b>CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	<b>RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES</b>
Low range of High-conflict	High self-esteem
	High social competence
	Average academic achievement
	Socially appropriate behaviour

**Conclusions**

The conclusions reached from the narrative descriptions do not represent any pre-conceived hypothesis. These conclusions emerged from the analysis of the data.

The narrative descriptions of the families display a variety of types of family composition and re-constitution. Many of the parents have remarried or are in new common law unions. Some have separated from their new relationships. There are children from the new unions that have been added to the family, often bringing a new strength and sense of hope.

Children's reactions related to the interparental conflict included distress when hearing parents argue, anger about the conflict, and fear of seeing the primary parent in distress. Children's distress and feelings of anger had an indirect, and sometimes direct impact on how and if they wanted to spend time with the non-custodial parent.

The twelve families in this study exhibited varying levels of conflict on the continuum of high-conflict. The levels varied at different times since the separation, depending on the amount of direct contact between the parents and the issues that were left unresolved between them. In many cases the levels of conflict appeared to be tied to

the coping abilities of the children. For example, in Family #1 the parents were still engaged in a great deal of high conflict over a three-year post-separation period. As well, the parents were at the higher end of the continuum of high-conflict for many years prior to the separation. While the child exhibited the ability to attend school and meet with friends, he was often depressed and unable to perform day-to-day functions. This would suggest he had the minimal amount of coping skills necessary to be socially competent. Family # 12 was designated on the low end of the continuum of high-conflict. The child in this family had no problems with social competence, excelled at school and talked about feeling good about her situation. While there are other factors to consider when hypothesizing how children cope with a parental separation, the context of interparental conflict needs careful examination.

The coping abilities of these children appear to be tied to the resilient attributes suggested in the pre-screening component of this study. As recommended earlier, the resilient attributes of social competence, socially appropriate behaviour, academic achievement and self-esteem or self-efficacy needed to be viewed on a continuum when considering how a child portrayed these attributes. As discussed in the narratives of each family, the children fit on a continuum of resilience; some exhibit more attributes while others have struggled, but are still able to utilize resiliency to cope with family issues.

The current composition of the family was often associated with how the children coped or exhibited competence. An example of this is seen through Family #10. Recently the father separated and the stepmother is no longer a part of the child's life. The child who has been doing well for several years is now exhibiting signs of

depression and having problems with peers in school. She is grieving the loss of members of her blended family. While she still exhibits some of the attributes of resilience needed to be part of the study, they have deteriorated since the change within her family. Family #11 shows another example of how the coping abilities of the child can be associated with changes in family composition. The child was doing well adjusting to her renewed relationship with her father. For example, she enjoyed helping her mother care for the new baby in the family. After eighteen months of spending time with her father, he stopped seeing her. Since that time the child's behaviour changed dramatically. She no longer wanted to interact with family members and even hit the baby on one occasion. This led to Winnipeg Child & Family Services involvement, the local child welfare agency. From this episode it became clear that this child needed a great deal of support at this time in an attempt to cope with the changes in her family. This small example provides further support that resilience is not always a fixed entity as suggested earlier in the literature review. Family dynamics are ever changing and the ability to cope also tends to fluctuate with the changes in the child's environment. It is therefore even more paramount that a way of building resilience be instituted into these children's lives in order for them to have alternative skills available when the family dynamics become difficult for them to manage.

The following summary table provides an overall picture of various descriptive aspects of the twelve families. Included is the level of interparental conflict and the children's resilient attributes. As well, the custodial arrangements and the length of the parental separation are summarized.

Table 13

DEMOGRAPHIC & NARRATIVE TABLE

FAMILY	CONTINUUM OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT	RESILIENT ATTRIBUTES-CHILD	LENGTH OF SEPARATION	CUSTODIAL ARRANGEMENTS
# 1	Mid-to High Range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Low self-esteem and social competence,</li> <li>-Average academic achievement</li> <li>- Moderate socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	3 years	Mother – primary care
# 2	Low range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderate self-esteem,</li> <li>- High academic achievement and social competence,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	18 months	Joint Custody
# 3	Mid range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem,</li> <li>- Low to moderate social competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	8 years	Mother – Sole Custody

# 4	High range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low to moderate self-esteem,</li> <li>- High social competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	7 years	Mother – primary care
# 5	Mid – high range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem and low self-competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	8 years	Joint Custody
# 6	Mid range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderate self-esteem,</li> <li>- High academic achievement and social competence,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	2 years	Father – primary care
# 7	Mid to high range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderate self-esteem,</li> <li>- High academic achievement</li> <li>- Moderate social competence,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	2 years	Mother – primary care

# 8	Mid to high range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem,</li> <li>- Moderate social competence,</li> <li>- Low academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	6 years	Father – sole custody
# 9	High range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem,</li> <li>- Moderate social competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate conduct</li> </ul>	13 years	Mother – sole custody
# 10	Mid to high range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem,</li> <li>- Moderate social competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Difficulty with socially appropriate behaviour</li> </ul>	7 years	Joint custody
# 11	Mid range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low self-esteem and social competence,</li> <li>- Below average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Difficulty with appropriate behaviour</li> </ul>	10 years	Mother – sole custody

# 12	Low range of high-conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High self-esteem and social competence,</li> <li>- Average academic achievement,</li> <li>- Socially appropriate behaviour</li> </ul>	8 years	Joint custody
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Building on the demographic and narrative information is the more formal analysis of the data. This next step involved coding the data and developing a proposition from it. The next chapter will focus on examining how the raw data was coded and analyzed using the tenets of grounded theory methodology. From this analysis a substantive level theory is proposed to explain the link between individual resilience and family strengths. Examples of this theory are shown through the child's words as retrieved from the taped conversations with them. This further elucidates the understanding of the phenomenon of interparental conflict from the perspective of the child. As well there is a discussion of how this theory fits within larger theoretical frameworks reviewed from the literature.

## CHAPTER V

### THEORY DEVELOPMENT

This chapter reports on the theoretical analysis of the data from the project. This analytic process was based on immersion in the data. In-depth descriptions of the results from the data are provided. This includes a description of the way in which the data was coded and categorized. The initial analysis of the raw data began with open coding. This was completed through the use of QSR NVivo, a qualitative computer software program. This software program was only used for the open coding and categorizing of the data. Information about this program and how it was used is included in this section.

Discussion of the analysis continues using the concepts from grounded theory methodology. The second phase of this analysis was through axial coding. Through this step the initial categories were refined eventually leading to the development of five central categories. As well, through axial coding interrelationships amongst the categories were discovered that were used to build a proposition explaining these relationships.

According to grounded theory methodology the last phase of the analysis is selective coding. This phase involves building a theoretical framework from propositions developed during axial coding. Included are two narrative examples conceptualizing the theory developed from this study. As well, connections are made from the emerging theory to other pertinent theoretical frameworks.

Reflexivity is an important component of any qualitative research. Examining this concept ensures that issues such as power and self are considered. In the later part of this chapter there is a discussion of how reflexivity was used by the writer, both as a way of understanding the issues and throughout the analysis of the data.

### **Results from Open Coding**

The first step in the analysis of the data was through 'open coding'. This coding included the examination of the transcribed texts of all the information collected in the data collection phase of the study, including the interviews, focus group and document review. It is made up of individual words, phrases and sentences. In grounded theory open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). For example, through the open coding from this study, specific phrases repeated by the children and parents about conflict or the children witnessing conflict were the individual words and sentences suggesting a careful examination of this phenomenon was necessary.

In order to begin the process of the coding of the data, the transcripts of the interviews and focus group were reviewed on a line by line basis after they were integrated into a qualitative software program, QSR NVivo. QSR was the developer of NUD\*IST, the pioneer program for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing. This particular software program was developed in 2002 and is the sixth version of the original software. The NVivo software program is designed to support the key tasks required in qualitative analysis. It is a flexible

document management system. It was used to import text data accumulated from this study. It has the ability to take this text and provide sites to code the context of coded passages or go back to the source for a review of the material. It allows for annotation and editing while coding without damaging the coding or interfering with the emerging categories. The program also stores information about demographics or can link to memos which, in turn, allows for the further development of categories. Using a computerized program for the coding allows for movement of information into the desired categories. Using this software program for the open coding provided easier access to the raw data in this stage of the analysis. As well, it ensured that that none of the information was misplaced or forgotten during this analytic phase. This software program was only used for the initial phase of the analysis in this study. As the study was relatively small, once the codes and categories had been created, they could be transferred to paper for further analysis. This made it easier to process the information as well as beginning to formulate ideas for the larger emerging categories and the interrelationships between these categories.

The NVivo software program allowed for the formulation of 'nodes' or categories as a way to store the coding of data. From the raw data, 24 primary nodes or categories were developed. These categories summarized the findings in the study. The headings for these categories are listed in table on the following page. Included in this table are examples of how the data was incorporated into the categories.

Table 14

Open Coding Categories

<p>◆ <b>Communication.</b> One of the children stated that his parents communicate with each other at his extra-curricular activities. One of the parents discussed how she communicates better with the stepmother than with her former husband.</p>
<p>◆ <b>Conflict.</b> The parents described when and how the interparental conflict took place, both before and after the separation.</p>
<p>◆ <b>Types of access.</b> Some of the parents discussed how the time-sharing arrangements had evolved since the separation, including descriptions of the current court order delineating the time-sharing agreement. Some of the custodial parents were discouraged by the ways in which the other parent exercised the access. An example of this included one mother stating, "there is no consistency in his access to our daughter. None, whatsoever. He (the father) goes in cycles kind of like every six to eight months our son gets a phone call. Or if maintenance payments are due he will call our son."</p>
<p>◆ <b>Relationship with the other parent.</b> Some of the children described their current relationship with the non-custodial parent. A few of the parents discussed their concerns about the other parents' lack of interest in the child.</p>
<p>◆ <b>Differences since separation.</b> One child stated that "my parents get along better now than before the separation". Other children discussed being in two different residences and seeing more of extended family. Some of the parents described differences in the children's behaviour, i.e., "my child was quite depressed initially after the separation, but seems to be doing better now".</p>

◆ ***Child's Assets.*** This category included many concepts. Approximately half came from the children and half from the parents. Some of the children discussed things they were able to do with their parents after the separation that made them feel good about themselves. For example, children spoke of both parents being able to attend their extra-curricular activities. This made the child feel that their parents were able to set aside their conflict for a short period of time in order to show their support. Many of the children talked about feeling good about participating in sports or other extra-curricular activities. Many of the children stated that their friends made them feel good. Some of the children talked about feeling stronger when they felt good about themselves or a member their family. The parents expressed a lot of ideas about their children's assets. For example, one parent stated, "his strengths are that he is in a superior range of vocabulary and verbal comprehension. He is very, very intelligent. He is creative with his artwork. He's got ideas on how to build things. And I can throw a problem at him and he turns around and gives me the answer. Like better than any grown up would. You know, he can organize mentally, but not on paper. He is also a very caring and emphatic young man. He'll think about how other people feel." Another mother stated, "she is always happy. Like when she wakes up in the morning she is happy. She doesn't talk back. And it just makes it pleasant as I am not fighting with her in the morning. And she is getting more helpful, like now she sets the table, whereas before, it was like pulling teeth to get her to do anything. She just makes it easy to be around her".

***How children handle stress.*** There were ideas expressed by both the children and the parents in this category. Some of the children identified their places of security they

turned to when they felt they didn't have any control of what was happening in their family. Examples of these places of refuge were with pets, at church, with friends, stepparents or grandparents. The parents identified ways that the children cope with stress, including talking about feelings, and spending time by themselves or with friends.

◆ ***Children's activities.*** Children's answers included: swimming, soccer, Ukrainian dancing, choir, church, sports.

◆ ***Social competence.*** In this category children identified ways in which they accomplished particular tasks, including completing their homework, getting ready for school in the morning or helping with chores at home. The parents identified the children being able to finish their schoolwork in a timely manner or ways in which the children completed daily tasks. Some of the parents identified a continuum of social competence. For example, one parent discussed how her son could only do certain chores at home, others remained unattended to due the child's lack of focus. Another mother identified the child being able to complete his homework assignments with the help of a tutor.

◆ ***Social supports.*** There were a large number of concepts identified that fit in this category. Many of the children identified stepparents and grandparents, as well as friends. The parents said extended family members and friends of the children provided support to their children.

**Information about separation.** While this was a small category, some concepts that were included fell into the area of how the children were told about their parents' separation as well as how the children found out about the separation. One example from the child in response to a question about how his parents told him about the separation was, "They didn't. The cops did. After the cops came to the house, my dad never came back."

◆ **Collateral supports of children.** The children described their experiences with outside support systems, including teachers and counselors.

◆ **Barriers to resilience in children.** In this category, some of the parents described how the negative aspects of the other parent might be harmful to the child's ability to adapt to the separation. For example, one parent stated that, "blended family issues might take their toll" or another stated "my child is afraid of his father".

**Children's advice about how to handle interparental conflict.** Some of the children were able to articulate their struggles through advice to the other children. One example is "That the separation is not their fault and don't worry about what is happening between your parents".

**Child's way of handling conflict.** Some of the children handled conflict at school by fighting back or walking away from the conflict. Others described using extra-curricular activities as an outlet for their frustration and anger.

◆ **Family strengths.** Children included ideas associated with communication amongst family members. Parents described being flexible with time-sharing schedules and including extended family in family gatherings.

◆ **Family coherence.** Some of the parents discussed how they made decisions together as a family unit. This family unit often included the children and the one parent or the children and the parent and stepparent. Many of the parents identified 'communication' as being a key factor in their family. They felt that they could communicate with their child/ren.

◆ **Coping skills of child.** Examples of how children coped were delineated by both the children and the parents. Children described playing with their animals, listening to music or escaping to their room when they needed a place of refuge.

◆ **Dreams of child for the future of their family.** There were only a few children who were able to describe their dreams. One child stated, "My parents would be able to sit side by side at my volleyball game".

**Parents' coping.** Parents identified new ways in which they had attempted to cope with the interparental conflict since the separation. Examples were attending counseling, parent information seminars or talking with friends. One parent identified a negative coping skill (e.g. increased amount of use of alcohol).

◆ **Stepparent involvement.** Both the parents and the children discussed many ideas associated with their stepparents. For example, the children identified how their stepparents had provided a sense of security or given them a 'father' or 'mother' figure in their lives. The parents talked about the stepparent taking on a parental role or spending time with the children.

◆ **Resolution of issues for parents.** Many of the parents listed attempts through the court system, lawyers or family conciliation as a way of attempting to resolve their post-separation issues.

◆ ***Cultural affiliation.*** While a few of the children were able to identify their ethnic background, many did not know what it was or feel any connection to a particular culture.

◆ ***Children witnessing conflict between parents.*** Both the parents and the children identified specific times and places in which the child/ren had witnessed the interparental conflict.

Over 375 individual concepts or ideas expressed by the parents, the children, the focus group or file documentation were coded from the raw data. They were integrated into the categories displayed in Table 14. The coding from the raw data identified whether the information came from the parents or child. For example, the children described their fear of hearing the parents arguing between their parents. The parents described conflict in terms of unresolved custodial or financial issues. While conflict merged into one category, it was important to note distinctions between how the children and parents understood the role of ongoing conflict within family life. These distinctions were later used to better understand the adaptive process of all family members.

While open coding is a distinct phase in which categories are developed from the raw data, the ideas for how the categories may be interrelated had already begun to emerge. This is explained further through the process of axial coding.

## **Results from Axial Coding**

In grounded theory methodology axial coding follows open coding. It allows the researcher to begin identifying the central phenomenon from the categories and defining how this category is related to the others. In order to identify the central phenomenon in this project the initial categories needed to be refined. Grounded theory methodology refers to this as 'constant comparison'. While constant comparison begins with sifting through information gained in the interviews, it continues with comparing data found in various categories. Some categories seemed to be connected, that is they pertained to the same phenomenon. For example the area of conflict appeared to fit in one category but related concepts included the children witnessing conflict as well as barriers to resilience. The concept of barriers was included as many of the ideas expressed about these barriers by both the parents and the children suggested that ongoing interparental conflict was one of the key barriers to children being able to exhibit resilient characteristics. This category was given the name of 'Interparental Conflict' as it now encompassed all the concepts pertaining to conflict between parents. After some reflection and comparison of the initial categories, further categorizing was completed, yielding increasingly complex and inclusive categories. The categories that appeared to fit together were regrouped with some of the labels changed to encompass the general phenomena of that category.

Five categories appeared to encompass the general ideas uncovered from the initial coding process. The remaining categories are referred to as sub-categories of these concepts that are included in the ideas for the key concept of that main category. The sub-categories fit along a continuum within the main category, i.e., they are listed

according to how they fit into the key concept. The sub-categories include data related to the category. However, this information may not hold as much interest or relevance towards answering the research questions. Alternatively, the sub-categories may provide more of a description or explanation of the main category. For example, in the category, Interparental Conflict, sub-categories may explain the scope, nature, and level of the conflict.

The five categories are listed below along with their sub-categories. The sub-categories are listed in the relative order of their significance to the overall category. For example, in the category, 'Internal support systems of the child', concepts associated with 'child's strengths' were discussed in greater depth by both the children and the parents, than concepts associated with 'coping skills of the child'.

1) ***Interparental conflict:***

- Children witnessing conflict
- Barriers to resilient behaviour

2) ***Post-separation changes:***

- Communication
- Differences since the separation
- Types of access
- Relationship with the other parent
- Parents' coping
- Children's advice

3) ***Internal support systems of child:***

- Children's assets

- Coping skills of child
- How children handle stress
- How children handle conflict
- Dreams of child.

4) *External support systems:*

- Children's activities
- Social supports
- Collateral supports
- Cultural and Religious affiliation

5) *Family strengths:*

- Family coherence
- Stepparent involvement
- Extended family involvement
- Resolution of issues
- Children's advice

The next step of axial coding allows the researcher to find a central phenomenon from one of the five main categories and then systematically relate the central phenomenon to the other categories. At this point in the analysis of the data the information was taken from the software program and transferred to paper. This allowed for the researcher to view the categories as a whole and conceptualize the interrelationships amongst the categories. In other words, it was necessary to find a way that the ideas within the categories are related to each other. In this project the final five categories were considered within a 'coding paradigm' (Creswell, 1998) that

explains the interrelationships of the categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest using the concepts of context, causal conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences as ways of explaining these interrelationships. The following will illustrate the interrelationships of the five main categories using the concepts suggested above.

### ***Central Phenomenon***

Within ground theory the central phenomenon is chosen from one category, a starting point from which to link the other categories. In this study the category chosen was 'family strengths'. This category provides the key information from both the children and parents. It appears to be the central category that connects to all other categories. Through examination of the amount and complexity of data compiled in this category, it appears to hold the most conceptual interest. For example, one of its sub-categories, 'stepparent involvement' appears to be highly relevant with respect to how well the children cope with the ongoing parental conflict. It is a theme that frequently appeared in discussions with the parents and the children. One mother stated, "I remarried in 1999. We started living together in 1997. He (step-father) basically took over the father role". Another mother stated, "my daughter always longed for the father-daughter bond. She didn't seem to have it with her father. Now she has it with her step-father and seems to thrive on it". A different mother stated, "her stepfather treats her exactly like his own child. You know, she calls him dad and that wasn't my choice, it was her choice". It appears that these new attachments created a sense of security for the children.

Many of the children expressed a great deal of satisfaction from their relationships with their stepparents. It was a predominant theme. One of the children stated, "my step-father feels like my real dad". Another child stated, "my step-mother has been the most helpful person to me since the separation."

Other sub-categories of this central phenomenon include family coherence, resolution of issues and children's advice. Including the category of children's advice was a way of incorporating the child's voice, i.e., an attempt to understand the meaning of the issues from his/her perspective. Using family strengths as a central phenomenon provides a way of understanding how the categories are interrelated and allows for a fuller examination of the issues related to children's resilience. This is the core category around which a theory was developed. It holds the most information and interest and helped to move towards integrating the remaining categories. Integrating these categories provided answers to the research questions. As well, a proposition is developed from this integration that eventually leads to theory development.

### ***Context***

Context refers to the particular set of conditions within which the strategies occur or the underlying conditions that pertain to the phenomenon in question. In this study the context was the interparental conflict, that is, the ongoing conflict between the parents. This context was predominant, as it was the environment in which these families continued struggle. Ongoing interparental conflict led to the particular set of conditions that needed a strategy or action. The category of Interparental Conflict reflected the stories of the parents and the children of their need to find strategies or

ways to help them to cope with the ongoing conflict. The context in this study represents a continuum of conflict. Some families continued to experience it at a greater level than others. How family members understood the interparental conflict or managed it is reflected in various ways through their stories, but it is the ongoing context in all of their stories. For example, one mother stated,

The conflict between us (she and the other parent) is still horrible. He will phone me and leave me these mean messages and stuff like that on the phone. He will say something about my boyfriend that shouldn't be said over the phone, especially in messages that my children could listen to later.

One child commented on how he would come home and find his parents in conflict over many issues, "My father often starts yelling and then my mother yells back. My father uses such strong words and I see my mother crying. It makes me feel mad and sad".

Another child stated, "My parents fight mostly over the phone. I hear them talking about who wants to take me for holiday or a weekend. All that stuff. Sometimes stuff that doesn't make any sense to me."

### ***Causal Conditions***

Causal conditions influence the central phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define this term as "the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon" (p.100). From the main categories of this data the particular causal conditions are post-separation changes. The separation can trigger issues leading to high conflict or exacerbate interparental conflict. Alternatively, the separation can reduce the level of conflict between the parents. Sub-categories include communication, differences since the separation, types of access, relationship with the other parent and parents' coping. This category reflects the changes and developments

leading to the central phenomenon that are located within the data. For example, the parent's ability to cope with their circumstances included being in a new relationship or taking a parent education seminar that allowed them the opportunity to learn more about the issues involved in co-parenting after a separation. Changes since the separation led to many of these families finding the strengths necessary to move forward despite the ongoing interparental conflict. For example, some of the parents were able to find new partners and form strong secure relationships with them. Other parents were still struggling to maintain their equilibrium several years after the separation. One of the parents stated that she got along better with the stepmother than the father, "He (the father) and I communicate very rarely and when we do we argue. I get along better with his wife and we talk about our child. It just works better this way". One of the children found that since the separation "her mother gets along better with her father now". This information suggests that due to the lower level of conflict due to the separation, the child felt better about other changes, i.e., moving to a different home and having to find new friends in the neighbourhood.

### ***Action/interaction Strategies***

Action/interaction strategies refer to the tactics or responses that manage or have consequences with respect to the central phenomenon. They can also be seen as the intervening conditions that facilitate or constrain the strategies for change. From the categories, it appears that the external support systems of the child augment family strengths. External support systems include social or collateral supports. They are intervening conditions or alternative support systems that impact on family strengths

and integrate with the child's ability to cope with the ongoing conflict. Examples of the children's responses to questions about the impact of external support systems are:

"lots of aunts and uncles who help me out when I am down", and

a couple of good friends from school. I have known them for quite a while and they all know what is happening with me. They help me out. It is a good thing that is happening for me.

Another child talked about the intervening support of her youth group church. She stated:

On Friday we have youth group. What we do is go to church on Friday night. We go out rallying or doing something fun. Or sometimes we'll just stay in and have some fun – play sports or pray with each other.

Parents' responses included, "she has the support not only from her stepfather and I but she also has support from her stepfather's parents". Another parent talked about the community support for her son. She stated, "he goes to the co-op to visit his friends. He is able to talk to other kids about what is going on for him there".

These examples show that the children use their external support system to augment the strengths of the family, thereby helping them to cope with the conflict between their parents. Many of the children had access to strong supports within the family, i.e., stepparents or grandparents, and peers, teachers or extra-curricular activities. Other children only had access to friends and limited community supports. Still others were placed with a more formal set of external support systems, e.g., counselors, or group therapy. Many of the children that worked with outside counselors appeared to benefit from these interventions. For example, children who used the help of counselors to express their anger or feelings of loss at the time of the separation were able to find ways to cope with the ongoing interparental conflict. As well, many of the children who utilized their peer networks felt they were not alone with their feelings of

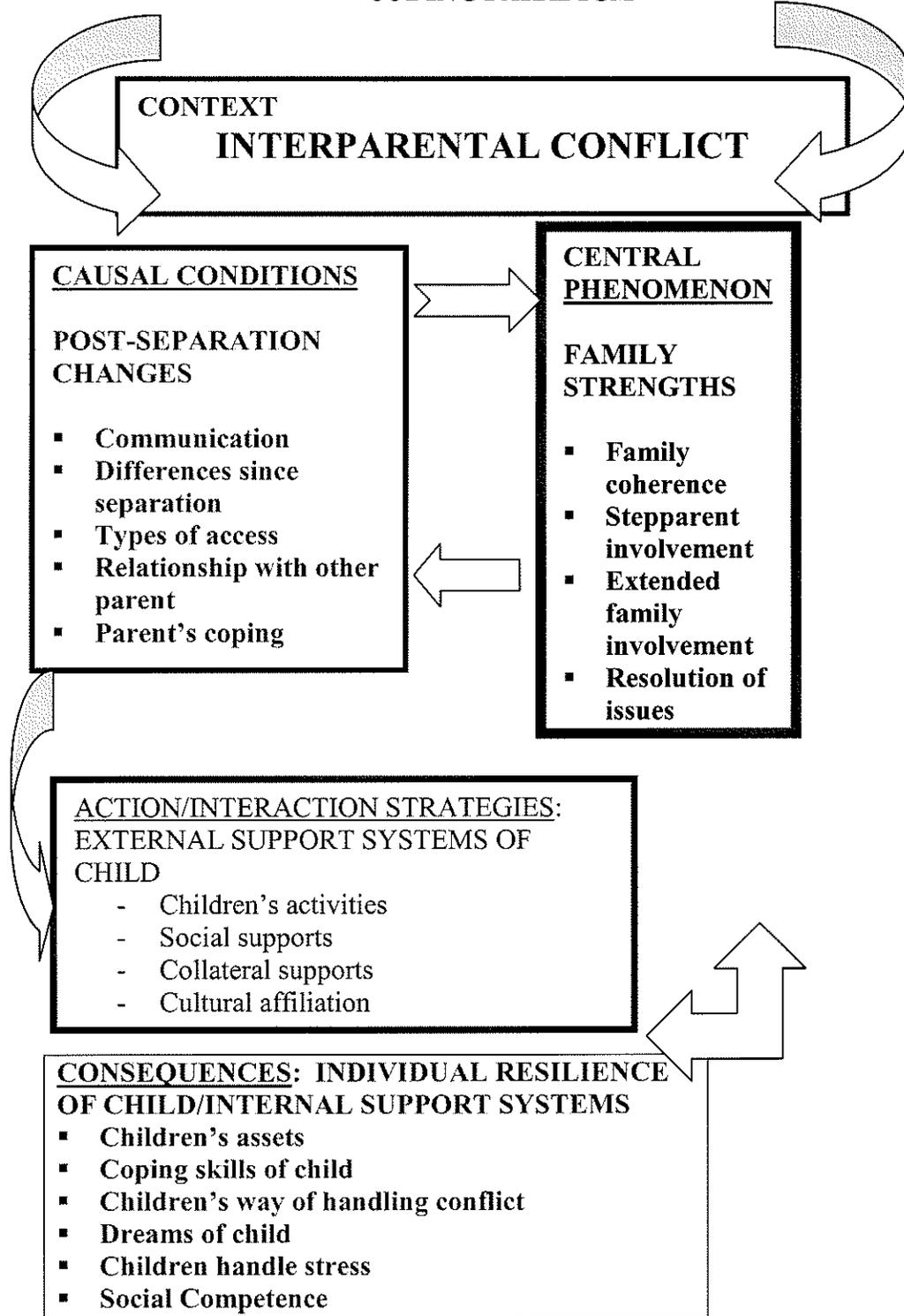
loss or sense of displacement. However, the children who had access to both external support systems and family support systems exhibited more resilient characteristics than those that only utilized external support systems. This can be illustrated by comparing two families (Family #5 and Family #6). The child in Family #6 had developed a strong relationship with her paternal grandmother and had various external support systems. She was rated quite high within the domains of resilience outlined for this study. Alternatively, the child from Family #5 only had external support systems without the additional support of extended family members. He did not show the same strength in his resilient attributes as the child from Family #6.

### *Consequences/Outcomes*

The last aspect of the coding paradigm includes the consequences or the outcomes of the action/interaction that work in conjunction with the central phenomenon. From this data it appears the individual resilience of the children is gained or sustained through the interaction of family strengths in conjunction with the external support systems of the child. Specifically the internal support system of the child is the category delineated for this component of the paradigm. The sub-categories include: individual strengths and coping skills of the child, the way they handle stress and conflict, their dreams, and the idea of social competence, or how they can manage to carry on with everyday tasks. The idea of the child's voice becomes predominant in this category as the child asserts her/himself through the use of coping skills and ways in which they manage the stress associated with the interparental conflict.

The concepts of context, causal conditions, a central phenomenon, action/interaction strategies, and consequences are displayed in a coding paradigm. The coding paradigm is portrayed using a visual diagram in Figure II. Included in this paradigm is the concept of bidirectional causality portrayed through the use of arrows. The assumptions of a bilateral model of parent-child relations include the parent-child relationship as the context for parent-child interaction (Kuczynski, 2003). The concepts described in this paradigm do not simply move in a unilateral direction. Information from this study suggests that although there are various outcomes due to family strengths, they are also the result of the interactions and interrelationships between and amongst various family members. For example, how the primary parent copes with the ongoing interparental conflict may relate to the interdependence of family members, i.e., how these family members understand and cope with this issue. All family members influence how the environment of interparental conflict becomes the central context of these families. For example, how the child interacts with a stepparent will influence how much support can be gained from this relationship. The child may feel their loyalty to the other parent is being compromised if s/he forms a secure attachment to the stepparent. Alternatively, the child/stepparent relationship could be strengthened with the support of both the parents. With the 'Action/Interaction Strategies', the child's ability to use external resources may be affected by both the parent's understanding of the child's needs and the child's ability to voice his/her needs. The child needs to feel s/he can voice her needs with respect to counseling, extra-curricular activities or peer support. This would entail an open and responsive relationship between the parent/s and child.

**FIGURE II**  
**CODING PARADIGM**



## **Results of Selective Coding**

Selective coding is the final phase in the coding of the data. It allows for a further look at the categories and their interrelationships, filling in the necessary information from the existing data where needed. This includes examining the sub-categories in order to understand how they impact on the central phenomenon. Propositions can then be formed upon which to base a substantive-level theory.

Within all the main categories the various sub-categories were differentiated on a continuum with the sub-categories listed in order of their priority, i.e., the number of times they were coded. For example, in the sub-category of 'children's activities' and 'social supports', particularly friends, were found to be much more prevalent than collateral supports and at the further end of the continuum, cultural or religious affiliation. It is also important to note that some variables may not have been discovered within these categories due to the small sample of the study. Therefore, within the continuum of sub-categories some of the variables may be missing.

Within the central five categories, there are particular sub-categories within each of these categories that need to be recognized. Some of the sub-categories play an important part in the understanding of the interrelationships within the central categories. Some of these sub-categories are given a higher priority due to the number of times they were observed during the initial coding of the data. This is evident from the main category of 'family strengths' in that sub-categories of 'stepparent involvement' and 'family coherence' both play a major role in understanding how the various family members both create and utilize family strengths. As family members interact with each other they find existing strengths and create new ones through

mutual support and respect. Family coherence involves shared values, loyalty, caring, trust and respect of each other. It expresses the family's shared feelings of confidence that an event or crisis can be managed. For example, through family coherence many of these families were able to work together at various stressful times in order to manage the impact of the family conflict. This was often seen through the custodial parent and child having an open and trusting relationship from which they could discuss issues and problem-solve together as matters of trust and shared values are key components in the concept of family coherence. One mother stated, "one of the strengths in our family is that we have discussions and make decisions together". A child talked about how she goes to her mother for advice, "One day I got into an argument with a friend. I talked to my parents about what happened and they gave me some ideas of how to handle it. I took their advice". A father stated, "my daughter is responsible and does her homework. She also participates in chores at the house, we are a team within the house".

The sub-category of family coherence suggests that families are able to work together due to an ability to trust each other and maintain family functioning. Family coherence is one of the properties or concepts in the category of 'family strengths' that suggests this category is the central phenomenon. Ideas related to family coherence were noted in many of the families. Examples of family coherence included the primary parent and child discussing how changes in the family structure affected family members. However, some families did not appear to exhibit family coherence or have any positive stepparent involvement. In these families fewer family strengths were noted. In turn the children from these families exhibited fewer coping skills and

fewer resilient characteristics. This suggests there is a continuum of individual resilience that is dependent and connected to how families can work together and incorporate new family members after the separation. This information helps to substantiate the authenticity of this study as it suggests that family strengths are connected to the child's ability to successfully cope with the ongoing interparental conflict. The following provides examples of the connections developed within the sub-categories of the central phenomenon of 'family strengths'.

Using the narrative information from the last chapter, Family # 1 and Family #4 were examples of the connections between family coherence, family strengths and the resilient attributes of the children. As suggested earlier the child from Family #1 did not exhibit as many resilient characteristics as many of the other children. He had been in an environment of interparental high-conflict for many years before his parents' separation and for the three years since the separation. Coinciding with the ongoing high level of conflict was the lack of family coherence and no stepparent involvement. In Family #4 the child spoke of how much emotional security she had received from her stepmother in the past and how attached she had become to her over the past few years. The stepmother had provided her with emotional support and nurturing for a number of years. As noted earlier, the father from this family had recently been arrested for assaulting the stepmother and the stepmother was no longer a part of this child's life. After completing the data analysis on this case and listening to the child's story, the results indicated she exhibited fewer individual strengths than many of the other children. This was interrelated with the recent loss of the emotional support of her stepmother. This example stresses the importance of the stepparent involvement

and how it contributes to the child's ability to exhibit resilient characteristics despite the ongoing interparental conflict.

### **Proposition**

From the interrelationships built within the coding paradigm, a proposition with respect to children's ability to cope was identified. The proposition builds on the coding paradigm and provides further clarification of how the family provides the strength that enables the child to exhibit resilient characteristics. It provides a broader systemic view of the information gained through the study. It is the final step leading to the development of substantive-level theory. For the purpose of this proposition, the concept of a 'family' refers to a positive and strong relationship between a parent and child. The proposition states that families who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as stepparents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External supports systems including friends, teachers, counsellors and extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families then enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict. The children that exhibited the most resilient characteristics from this study had the emotional support of their primary parent and a stepparent or grandparent/s. They were able to form new secure attachments with either stepparents or grandparents. The children exhibiting resilient attributes talked about having at least one close friend. Some of them had also discussed their family situation with a school counselor.

Family #6 is an example of the above proposition. This family was able to reorganize after the separation by expanding to include the paternal grandmother. The child feels the strong emotional support of both her primary parent (her father) and her paternal grandmother. The following is an excerpt from the transcripts that exemplifies how the family was able to reorganize after the separation by including extended family members. The child was then able to use this emotional support and family coherence to access her resilient attributes. The child also discusses the importance of her peers, an example of the final component of the proposition.

**Child:** Since the separation I got to become friends with my grandmother. Now I see much more of my (paternal) grandma which I like. I see her once a week and we do things together. Before the separation I didn't see her too much. But since the separation I get to see her more and we have got quite close to each other. I also get to continue to spend time with my friends, both from school and from the neighbourhood. I have known them for a long time and get along good with them. I can talk with them about anything, when I am upset about stuff or anything.

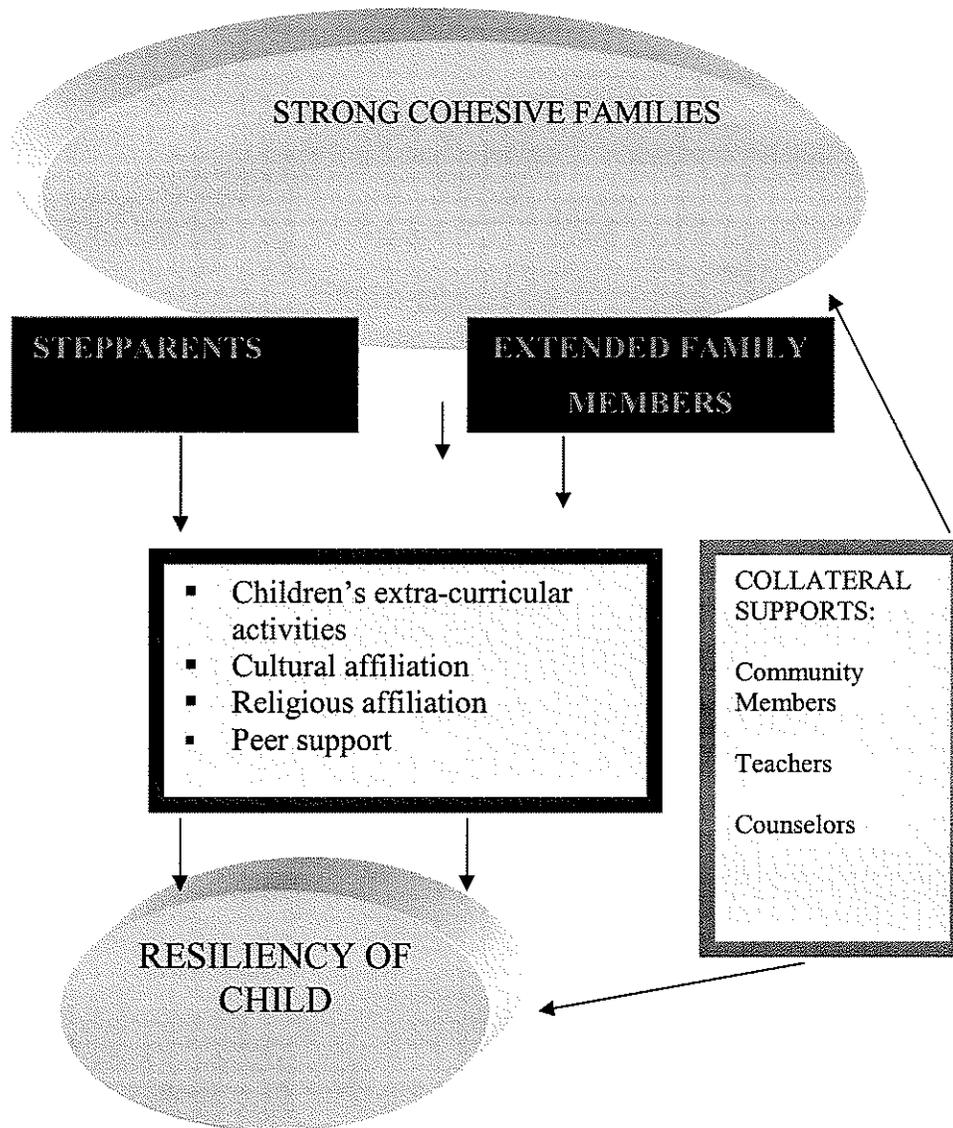
**Father:** I know my daughter counts on my mother in her life now. My mom comes in once a week and we do a Tuesday supper and mom supervises a girly bath. Something that I can't do. And they talk. My daughter will say that she wants to be with her grandmother and I know she appreciates the time she spends with her.

**Grandmother:** I love my granddaughter and am happy to spend time with her. She and I have gotten very close since the separation, I provide her with a lot of mentoring. I give her some direction, help her to be creative and teach her many things. She turns to me when her parents argue, especially since the separation.

Figure III (on the following page) provides a visual representation of the proposition formed from the results of the analysis. It provides an interactive picture of the protective factors contributing to resiliency in the children.

Figure III

PROPOSITION



Separated families in high-conflict who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as stepparents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External supports systems including friends, teachers, counsellors and extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families then enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict.

*\*Families refer to positive strong relationships between parent and child.*

### **Moving from Proposition to Substantive-level theory**

The proposition gained from the coding paradigm forms the framework of the substantive-level theory. To help develop this theory, other ideas and theories discussed in the literature review were considered. One of the established theories used is family stress theory initially developed by Reuben Hill in 1949 and further elaborated on in 1958. Family stress theory has been expanded upon by numerous theorists over the last several decades and now includes ideas related to coherence and context. Coherence refers to how families work together at times of crisis. Context can refer to family norms, culture or disposition. As a way of forming a theory that fit the population used as a sample within this study, it was helpful to utilize many of the components of family stress theory as discussed through the literature review previously in Chapter Two. While family stress theory has many tenets, the broad framework fits with the overall findings of this study. To illustrate, family stress theory provides insight into how families adapt to changes in structure. It offers an explanation that allows for an understanding of how families can adapt or cope with post-separation challenges. For example, families adapt through the use of the resources or strengths provided by the family that help to buffer the stressful event. In this study it was apparent that the external and internal resources of the family were vital to helping all family members cope with the interparental conflict. For example, external resources such as extended family members or teachers often provided the necessary help to the children allowing them to cope with the changes in the family due to the separation. As well these support systems also provided the necessary emotional security needed to cope with the ongoing interparental conflict. Many of the parents in this study had utilized the help of

outside counselors, lawyers, parent education seminars or the court in an attempt to find ways to move beyond the interparental conflict.

Another construct of family stress theory suggests that a family's ability to cope depend on how they view and define the stressful event. Therefore, understanding the family's meaning or perception of the stressful event is of utmost importance. Using the qualitative approach in this study allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the family's meaning of the interparental conflict and how the individual family members coped with it on an ongoing basis. In family stress theory, the meaning family members attach to the event defined whether they saw it as difficult to manage or a problem they could overcome. When hearing the family's stories from this study, some of the children saw the changes in their families due to the parental separation as 'normal' and were able to cope quite well. These children stated that many of their friends were also in the same situation and this made them feel that there was nothing different about their family. This included feeling comfortable and secure with stepparent and extended family involvement. Others focused on the ongoing interparental conflict as they found it difficult to manage and defined this chronic conflict as a stumbling block.

In the Double ABCX Model of family stress theory the idea of family coherence is important (Patterson & Garwick, 1998). In this model, family coherence is related to cognitive factors and has been defined as the family's ability to balance control and trust ( p. 72). Within the present study, both the parents and the children were able to delineate specific ways that the family as a whole was able to balance control and trust, thereby promoting family coherence. For example, some of the parents spoke of

sustaining their parent-child relationship through ongoing discussions as well as promoting a sense of security and independence. Others spoke of the importance of including the children in discussions about changes, thereby allowing the children to feel they had some input into family decisions. The children were able to voice their needs and feel their parents heard them. In their work, Antonovsky and Sourani (1988) found that the families with a strong sense of coherence both adapt more easily to change and are able to reorganize their family structure. In this study the families with a stronger sense of coherence were able to use this as a family strength and re-organize their family structure. This new family structure provided the basis for support to the children, allowing the children to mobilize their internal resources. The children's internal resources allowed them to adapt to the environment of interparental conflict. These internal resources included coping skills such as the positive way in which they handle stress, i.e. using music or spending time with a friend as a way to alleviate stress.

Family stress theory suggests that a family's strengths include the ability to acquire new ways to cope. However, it focuses on family strengths and does not specify how children in the family gain or utilize internal strengths. The results from this study were able to elaborate on this point by proposing that the children are able to use the strengths of the family to find ways in which to cope. For example, if one parent is able to re-organize the family structure to include a stepparent, the child is often able to form an emotional connection with the stepparent. This additional form of emotional security allows the child to adapt to the new family structure and cope with the ongoing parental conflict. The proposition from this study fits with family stress theory as it suggests that the central phenomenon, family strengths, help to buffer the stressful event

of ongoing interparental conflict. However, one of the parents has to be able to provide enough strength and emotional support to the children in order for the family unit to manage the crisis of the separation. If at least one parent, along with the children, can adapt by allowing extended family members to provide additional emotional or structural support, the child is able to exhibit resilient characteristics including social competence or socially appropriate behaviour.

The idea of context is also central to family stress theory. This includes the context of a family's culture, history, economics, developmental and genetic make-up, including race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical constitution (Boss, 2002, p. 51). Within this study a few of the children and parents identified religion and culture as being social supports that strengthened their ability to cope. For example, one child stated she went to a pre-teen group at her church on a weekly basis. She stated that she felt "good and at peace" when she attended these meetings. A few other children cited cultural activities as being both interesting and fun to attend. Some of the parents discussed how their faith helped them to cope with the parental conflict. Others suggested that the physical and emotional constitution and make-up of the children either hindered or helped them cope with the parental conflict. For example, the child with the developmental delay had a difficult time understanding why she could no longer spend time with her mother. However, she was able to use her stepmother as an emotional support to compensate for this loss. Some of the other parents commented on their children's emotional constitution, stating that at times the children were depressed, sad or angry. At these times the children had more difficulty achieving social competence or managing their behaviour.

Within the coding paradigm (Figure II) 'context' is described as the overall environment. The results from this study suggest that the overall environment is the ongoing interparental conflict. The context of interparental conflict is unique to each family with it being at lower or higher levels, depending on the level of conflict between the parents. However, the interparental conflict could be construed as being part of the family culture, as for some of these families this interparental conflict has been part of their lives for many years. In some cases the children were quite young when the parents separated and since that time they had been exposed to an environment of interparental conflict. In other cases the children were exposed to the conflict for a number of years prior to the separation. Interparental conflict was also a part of their lives for several years after the separation. The results from this study would suggest that many of the children were in this environment for several years, either through witnessing it or hearing about it from one of the parents. However, many had adapted to their surroundings and found new ways to cope within this environment.

DeGarmo and Forgatch's (1999) social interactional perspective is a different way of explaining the differences in children's behavior after family transitions. This model suggests that parenting practices are instrumental in ensuring normative behaviour in children. The results of this study reflect the social interactional perspective as the data substantiates the influence that parenting practices have on children's development. For example, the cohesiveness between the primary parent (i.e., usually the parent that spends more time and has the stronger relationship with the child) and child contributed to the ability of the child to access their internal strengths, e.g., coping skills. The social interactional model suggests family transition is a way of

exploring changes in family structure and family process. This study suggested that a particular family transition, i.e., encouraging a bond between the child and stepparent, was a positive family process for these children.

Werner and Smith (2001) stated that more protective factors are needed for children as the number of risk factors increase. As in this study, they found that the emotional support of alternative caregivers gain importance in middle childhood. For example, many of the children from this study found additional emotional support through their grandparents. In some cases the grandparents included maternal, paternal and stepgrandparents.

The emotional security hypothesis states that children reactions will vary depending on whether interparental conflict has destructive or constructive implications for the family and the individual child (Cummings & Wilson, 1999). The emotional security implications of the conflict are paramount in the way in which the children regulate their emotional arousal. From the results of this study, it was evident that children reacted in a negative fashion when the interparental conflict impacted them in a direct manner. For example, the child in Family #3 stated that "I knew my parents were arguing about whether my father should see me on the weekend. It made me sad to hear them and then I got mad and started crying". The child in Family #1 has continued to witness the high level of conflict between his parents since the separation. He has reacted in a negative way by showing signs of depression and hopelessness at various intervals over this period of time. He did not have the protective effect of a new secure attachment with a stepparent or extended family member to help ameliorate the stress of the high level of interparental conflict

It is important to consider the issue of emotional attachment within the context of the results of this study. Attachment theory suggests that individuals innately strive for connection to others (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Attachment relationships provide the child with protection against harm and with a sense of emotional security. Children may have different forms of attachment relationships with each parent, with one parent often being the primary attachment figure. Threats to these attachment relationships, such as those associated with parental separation, may lead to fear or anxiety and can cause a great deal of stress for children. According to Stroufe (1988), individuals exposed to a network of supportive individuals can incorporate traits that lead to a positive attachment. Many of the children in this study found alternative attachment figures, particularly in the form of stepparents, in which they felt a secure and positive attachment. This suggests that the child may need to form alternative positive attachments in order to manage the stress of the ongoing interparental conflict between their primary attachment figure (either or both parents) and the other parent.

Another writer whose work was used to understand the emerging theory from this study was Walsh (1998, 2002). Within her family resilience framework, she suggests that flexibility within the family is needed in order to adapt to changes. This would include the family's ability to reorganize while maintaining a continuity and connectedness. Using this framework, cohesion can be viewed as a form of connectedness. The results of this study indicate that the families are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members appear to exhibit a sense of connectedness and strength. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support and commitment to the new family unit. However, some blended families face difficulties

forming strong or supportive relationships. This was evident with a few cases in this study as the child was able to form a positive relationship with one stepparent, but not with the other.

Other tenets central to family resilience theory are ideas associated with individual hardiness in the context of the family as well as larger systems. This idea suggests a way of understanding how individual resilience is contingent on the strength of the family as a whole. For example, Walsh (1998) discusses the importance of a positive mutual interaction amongst family members as way of fostering individual resilience. The results of this study affirmed this concept, as the children having a strong parent-child bond as well as feeling secure within a blended family situation exhibited resilient attributes.

### **Substantive-level Theory**

The substantive level theory developed from this study is based on an inductive method of using ideas gained from a large amount of information and sifting through them to find a common thread. Due to the study's narrow focus on children exposed to high interparental conflict it is able to elaborate on existing theories, particularly in relation to this population group. The theory incorporates the proposition as defined from the coding paradigm. To reiterate, the proposition states that families who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as stepparents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External supports systems including friends, teachers, counsellors and

extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families then enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict. These families have a sense of cohesion due to their ability to successfully manage change and re-organization. In this population, it is often the primary parent and the children that form the sense of being connected that allows them to believe they can manage the crisis and re-organize as a family by allowing new members, particularly stepparents to provide additional emotional support.

The theory also incorporates ideas from family stress theory and uses the foundation of a family resilience approach. It uses ideas from the separation and divorce literature as well as an understanding of how children cope with ongoing parental conflict. It provides a concise way of framing the ideas developed within the coding paradigm and the proposition as well as incorporating other theories. It varies slightly from other theoretical constructs discussed through the earlier literature review, as it is limited to discussing the needs of a specific population, i.e., children between the ages of nine and twelve from families engaged in ongoing interparental conflict. Therefore, theory gained from this study speaks directly to the population of children experiencing ongoing interparental conflict. It is a tentative theory that is put forward in an attempt to begin to find ways to understand the resilient aspects of these children and needs further testing.

Substantive-level theory gained from this study states that children between the ages of nine and twelve, from separated or divorced, high-conflict families exhibit resilient characteristics when family cohesion is used to incorporate additional family

support systems, particularly stepparents and extended family members. External support systems, particularly peers, augment these resilient characteristics.

### **Using narrative to exemplify theory**

The following provides two examples illustrate the theory. They are retrieved from the transcripts of interviews with Family #3 and Family #7. The first example show how the child gains support from the cohesiveness in her custodial parents' home, using her stepfather as a primary source of comfort and security. It then shows the coping skills or resilient attributes employed by the child, as expressed both by the parent and the child. Excerpts from the interviews with the child and parent are provided below.

**Child:** I feel good about my family because they are a loving family and they care for me. I love my stepfather and would go to him if I needed help. My parents fight once in a while over the phone. My father does not understand that my new family (my sister and stepfather) means more to me than his family. I also feel close to my stepfather's parents. I spend two weeks with them every summer and time over the Spring Break and Christmas..... I am proud of myself because I get good grades in school, and am a good dancer. I have had a best friend for over five years. We go to dance classes and Brownies together.

**Parent:** My child has always been clingy. But I know that I can chalk up her moods and insecurities to the conflict between her father and me.... She (the child) thinks that her stepfather and her new sister are her family. We've given her a secure family life, home life. I think that as a family we are very honest, very open in our discussions. She and I are very close. She is also close to my mom, and her stepfather's parents. She copes with everyday stuff because she has had her stepfather in her life. She often goes to him before she'll come and find me. And I find that days that she's really down she's looking for him. She is needing his attention, his support. Not that she doesn't need mine, I don't know how to say it, but I think on those days that's the comfort that she's looking for. And she gets it. You know, people in the community my child interacts with, they even forget that her stepfather isn't her biological father..... My child's strengths are her kindness, her generosity and she is a smart little girl. She is easy going and gets along okay with her younger sister.

The following is the second example of the theory suggested from this study.

The excerpts of the interviews show how the child uses family cohesiveness along with external support systems to enhance his internal strengths, thereby helping him to cope with the ongoing interparental conflict. Included is an excerpt from the child, the parent and the child's teacher.

**Child:** My parents still argue, call each other names and swear at each other. I am not sure what they argue about. Since my parents separated I can have my friends over when I'm at my mom's house. And I have a lot of friends. My father would never let me have them over when my parents were together. I still see my father three days each week. But on Friday nights I get to stay at my (paternal) grandmother's house overnight. I like that because we get along really well...

If I have a problem at school I would go to my teacher and once I went to a school counselor. I also went to something called a children's group for kids whose parents were separated. That was okay. But my dad didn't want me to go back so I quit going. But if I had a real problem I would go to my mom, because I can talk to her about anything. And she has a boyfriend who lives with us sometimes and I get along good with him. Cause my dad doesn't really understand me....

If I was talking to other kids about what I went through I would tell them to 'Be strong'. And find something to help them be strong. My music has helped me, it gives me a lot of strength.

**Parent:** My child initially coped with all his anger by keeping a journal. He went to see a child psychologist for several sessions. This helped him and afterwards he felt much better. He is also close to his (paternal) grandmother. He can talk to her. He also talks to me. He talks to me about issues like his pre-teen outlook on life. He talks about his friends, what they are doing and then we come to some understandings of what he should be allowed to do at his age. At first when he was so angry we couldn't communicate so well, but now that he is less angry we can talk about things again. I try to let him have his own time cause I know he's growing up which is hard for me to accept. But I've given him his space and I try to continue to improve in that area. There are times when he gets cheeky with me and says things like stand up for yourself. Stand up for yourself when it comes to dad saying bad things to you. Be strong. When he says that to me he gives me a little bit of inner strength. It makes me glad that things turned out the way they did....

I think that he copes a lot better now mostly because he is stronger. He is a lot stronger than he was. He has come a long way from saying in his journal that he hated his father. His journal was a constant 'I hate you'. There are people in his

journal that he drew with knives going through them and blood squirting everywhere. He's come a long way. We make it through things together.

**Teacher:** Both parents are very involved with this child and his academic work. He is a high achiever and has excellent reading skills. Other children like him; he attracts friends. He plays many sports. He has a great sense of humor that helps him to cope with his situation. He is clear about his morals and values and is willing to take responsibility for his actions. He talks a lot about his grandparents and seems to be very close to them.

Both of these examples show how the child uses the primary parent and family coherence or a feeling of family connectedness, as the stepping stone towards finding their internal strengths. In the first example, the child is able to build upon her relationship with her mother by finding security within the newly blended family that is formed. In the second example, the child is able to work through his rage by using the external supports of counselors and teachers, as well as extended family members. From this he moves to acceptance and finding ways to cope with the ongoing interparental conflict.

### **Reflexivity and Analysis**

Throughout this study and while completing the analysis, I needed to constantly be aware of how I situated myself. This was evident from the beginning with the writing of the proposal through forming the research questions, outlining the semi-structured questionnaires, and shaping an operational definition of high-conflict. Deciding what role to take as a researcher took a great deal of consideration. Coming to the decision of using social constructionism as an epistemology was in large part due to ensuring that the participants' voices were heard through this study. While it was important that the research undertaken be methodically sound and rigorous, it was just

as important that the participants' opinions and ideas not be lost through this process. I decided to be situated in the background, allowing the participants to shape the ideas and issues raised from the questions.

As this subject area was well known to me due to my work with this population for many years, it required an extra effort to look beyond pre-conceived ideas related to the subject matter of the study. For example, being involved in the interviews required an ongoing internal dialogue, questioning any pre-determined notions or ideas related to the subject. This was particularly evident with the parents who were still in the grieving stage of the separation. They were often unable to concentrate on the pre-determined questions; instead they wanted to focus on their own suffering. Through these interviews, I became even more aware of how large a part the context of ongoing conflict played a role in these families lives. For example, in many of the families the conflict took on a life of its own and became the factor upon which other decisions rested. This sometimes led to a change in the way the interviews were structured, often having the parent lead the discussion. I was then situated as the listener, not the questioner, which allowed for a greater understanding of the issues and a respectful way of being with the participant. This stance also assured the parents that they were able to gain something for themselves and their children by being part of these interviews, even if it was simply the opportunity to be heard on this subject.

The issue of power was an important one to consider in this study for a number of reasons. First, the study took place through an agency dealing with separated and divorced families and in a government office. Even though I made every attempt to assure the participants that I was not in the position of a counselor, assessor, or

mediator, the participants still may have felt that I held some power over them. Many of the participants had used the services of this agency in earlier attempts to resolve their conflict. Some had been ordered by the court to attend meetings for the purpose of a counselor making arbitrary recommendations on their situation. These meetings may have left some family members feeling resentful about the agency or how they were heard in the past. In order to address this power issue, I offered to conduct the interviews in the home. This allowed both the child and the parent to feel they had some control over the process. As well, interviews were completed on weekends or evenings if this better suited the needs of the participants. Giving the participants some control over the process allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere, thereby promoting greater ease and an ability to concentrate on the telling of their stories.

In the final stage, the analysis of the data, reflexivity continued to play a part. For example, deciding what parts of the transcripts were coded and put into categories was possible because I had attempted to enter the world of the participant, whether it was the child or the parent. However, it is important to note that the length and breath of time in that world was minimal which may have left some questions unasked or unanswered. To compensate for this possibility, discussions were held with the Panel of Experts in order to ascertain that enough pertinent information was obtained to answer the three questions outlined in this study.

Finally, it is important to note the idea of 'voice' when discussing reflexivity. The idea of voice relates to the struggle to present the research findings from the researcher's perspective while ensuring that the voices of the participants are paramount (Hertz, 1997). Throughout the analysis of the data and the narrative summaries, I

attempted to present the findings through the lens of the research questions. In order to do so, it was necessary to sift through the information given by the participants. In doing so it became apparent that other topics of discussion had arisen during the interviews that needed to be included in the data analysis. For example, some of the children spoke of their dreams of having their parents reunited. While this did not directly answer one of the research questions, it did speak to how the child could use creative thinking to cope with the difficult times. It also allowed the child's voice to be heard within the perspective of my conclusions.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter discussed the results of the data analysis and led to a substantive-level theory. Information gained from in-depth interviews with the parents and children provided an initial understanding of the categories identified from this data. Data analysis continued with the results from open, axial, and selective coding. The qualitative software program, QSR NVivo was used to facilitate the open coding. Results from open coding allowed for categories to emerge, setting the stage for a discussion of the interrelationships of these categories. Using the results of axial coding, a paradigm was designed to illustrate the interrelationships of the categories. The central phenomenon of family strengths was chosen as the category upon which to relate the remaining four main categories. Eventually a substantive-level theory was extracted, both from the proposition and from existing theories.

The final chapter summarizes the answers to the three research questions outlined in this study. It provides recommendations for practice and policy changes with

respect to the results of this study. Ideas for change both within the family and within the community are delineated as a way of implementing these recommendations. Information is also provided on how these changes can be used to maximize the potential for resiliency in children who continue to live in an environment of ongoing interparental high-conflict.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research literature on how the interaction between children and parents promotes resiliency suggests a need for further examination. This includes the search for family resources and strengths. As well, more information on patterns of family functioning and family competence is needed. Searching for family patterns of unproductive coping and adaptations can also lead to a greater understanding of the barriers to resilient behaviour. Resilient characteristics found in a family can help to buffer the disabling effects of stressors on children as well as promote the family's recovery in the face of adversity. Within high conflict families several things buffer high conflict and help to support resilience even if persistent and ongoing conflict that places children in the middle make it harder to do so. This study searched for these characteristics within family members from high-conflict families in an attempt to understand how family members, particularly children, cope with the ongoing interparental conflict.

The issue of resilience is the central component of this study. This dissertation reviewed the current literature on this topic, and offered an operational definition of resilience. For the purpose of this study resiliency is conceptualized as an individual being able to adapt in the face of an adverse life situation (i.e., ongoing parental conflict). Resiliency is seen as an outcome, not a process. Using protective factors to shield against risk factors allows the individual to access resilient characteristics.

Connections between the theoretical framework and the research questions are delineated in the first component of this chapter. Conclusions about the resiliency of children in high-conflict separated families are discussed along with the answers to the questions. From these conclusions, ideas for building resilience in this population are discussed. A discussion of implications includes the ways in which clinical practice can incorporate promoting resilience in children from these families.

In order to implement effective clinical practice with this population some changes in policy are necessary. Recommendations for policy changes are delineated in conjunction with proposed clinical interventions.

The final component of this chapter provides concluding statements about this study. It addresses issues with respect to the results of this study as well as offering ideas for future research studies with this population.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

The results of this study offer a proposition regarding how children between the ages of nine and twelve can exhibit resilient behaviour in the face of ongoing interparental conflict. Families who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as stepparents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External support systems including friends, teachers, counsellors and extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families' enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict. Substantive-level theory gained from this study states that children from separated or divorced, high-

conflict families exhibit resilient characteristics when family cohesion is used to incorporate additional family support systems, particularly stepparents and extended family members. External support systems augment these resilient characteristics.

The above proposition answers the central research question of the study, which was how the interactions of the family and pertinent community members promote resilient behaviour in the children of high-conflict parents. The interrelationships amongst the categories explain how the central phenomenon, 'family strengths' works with the intervening strategies of the 'external support systems of the child'. The sub-categories of collateral and social supports embedded in the extended family and community promote and enhance the individual resilience of the child. In turn the individual resilience of the child is developed, enhanced or supported through the internal support systems of the child. As noted earlier the internal support systems of the child include their individual coping skills and strengths. Examples of the internal support systems were seen in the way the children handled day-to-day stressful situations both with their peers and family members.

The second research question asked about how the children perceive their parents' ongoing conflict and how they understood the mediating attempts of both family and community members. The proposition answered this question by suggesting that external resources augment family resources. To fully answer this question the stories of the children were reviewed to find the meaning the children attached, both to the parental conflict and to outside resources. Many of the children expressed fear when talking about their parents past and present conflict scenarios. In listening to the children's stories it was apparent that some felt outside external supports were not

helpful while others found teachers and counselors to be impartial observers and/or mentors. For example, some of the children talked with their teachers about problems they were experiencing at school (e.g., with peers or in their academic studies). Others spoke of being able to talk to their teachers when they were having a difficult time coping due to the conflict between their parents. However, they rarely talked about the interparental conflict with their teachers as they had a difficult time discussing this issue. About half of the children had seen counselors to help them at the time of the separation. A few of the children found the counselors were able to help them talk about their situation. In turn this allowed them to express their anger or sadness. One child talked about how his counselor helped him to write about his feelings as a way of expressing his anger towards his father. Two of the children who had been to counselors stated they did not want to return as they did not find it to be a helpful process. Some of the children had been involved in a formal custody/access assessment ordered through the court. Even though all of these children had talked with an evaluator for the purpose of the assessment, they did not think that the evaluator listened to what they wanted. For example, one of the children wanted to see his father more often. After his parents went back to court nothing changed with respect to the time-sharing arrangements.

Most often the children used extended family, usually grandparents, as a source of refuge when the interparental conflict took place. Many spoke about their stepparents being a form of security that helped them get some distance from the parental conflict. Again, the proposition formed from the analysis of this data speaks to this question. The proposition states that the children gain their resilience from the

various strengths in their family enhanced by external support systems. When the children perceived their parent's conflict as unsafe or distressing, they would usually seek out a family member for comfort or refuge. If this were not available to them, they would turn to external support systems, the first choice being their peers. If they were at school and felt in the need of reassurance, some of the children stated they would talk with their teachers. In essence the children understood that the interparental conflict was destructive and looked to family and external support systems for refuge and safety.

The third and final research question asked about the barriers to resiliency in these children, as well as how they attempted to overcome these barriers. Through the data analysis, the most frequently identified barrier was the ongoing conflict between the parents. As discussed earlier, the parents were often still quite immersed in the interparental conflict and realized that it was having an adverse effect on the child. One parent stated, "my child's psychologist says he was internalizing our (interparental) conflict and that is why he has problems at school".

Another parent stated, "I think she realizes that we (both parents) still argue. She knows there is tension there, but I am not sure she realizes how much it is affecting her".

Another barrier suggested by the parents was that of the non-custodial parent either withholding access or not being available to have an ongoing relationship with the child. As an example, one mother stated,

A big problem for her is that her father is doing more harm than good. He just can't come into her life and then disappear again. I could be wrong, but I am getting this information from watching her. This is the time when she is growing and developing her personality. And it is an important time in her life as she is developing who she is. And that doesn't include her father. It's pretty

hard to include him when she doesn't see him very often and that is of his own doing.

Another mother equated her child's depression with the non-custodial parent withholding access. She stated,

I find that she (the child) has problems with depression. We've taken note on the calendar that it occurs when her father is either making problems for me or not keeping to the court order. She gets very down, very insecure.

Other parents talked about the child being afraid of the other parent as being a barrier to their development. One mother stated, "he (the child) is afraid of his father. He always has been afraid of him."

The children's response to the question of barriers centered on the negative impact of the interparental conflict. Some children stated that they got angry or depressed and unable to do as well in school as they would like because of it. Others talked about being afraid of one parent, often the one that they saw as the most destructive within the parental relationship, which in many cases was the non-custodial parent. Still others talked about barriers in the form of parents not allowing them to make their own decisions regarding time-sharing arrangements and how this was disruptive to their lives. One child stated,

My mother doesn't let me make any decisions about when I can see her, she doesn't think I can make these decisions for myself. I know what I want and what is best for me.

A few of the children talked about wanting more "say" about when they could spend time with each parent. This issue will be examined further in next section of this chapter.

To summarize, both the children and parents indicated the following barriers to the resiliency of the children: the ongoing interparental conflict, the child's fear of one

parent, the child being unable to have a consistent relationship with the non-custodial parent, and the child not being given enough decision-making power with respect to time-sharing issues.

The question of what prevents the children from overcoming the barrier to resilience, i.e., ongoing interparental conflict is an important one. The proposition suggests ways that the children could overcome this barrier as well as the others mentioned above. For example, if more external support systems are integrated into the children's lives, they may be able to use these to enhance their own resiliency. Alternatively, parents need to find ways to ensure the child is not part of the interparental conflict, thereby making certain that the child does not feel afraid of one parent. As well, time-sharing arrangements need to be followed by both parents to allow for positive parent-child relationships. This could be accomplished through addressing some of the post-separation changes including better communication between the parents.

### **Practice and Policy Implications**

The results from this study suggest that children need a refuge from the environment of interparental conflict that is often part of their families, both before the separation and sometimes for several years after it. Children are able to move forward in positive manner if they find a sense of security or refuge within their family. While some children are able to utilize external support systems such as friends or teachers to help them cope with the interparental conflict, these alone do not offer enough support. After a separation or divorce, it is most helpful if the family reorganizes in such a

manner that allows extended family members or blended family members the opportunity to offer additional support to the children.

In discussing the issue of resilience and the four key components mentioned in this study, concepts associated with protective factors need to be delineated. To ascertain resilient behaviour, dimensions of self-esteem/self-efficacy, social competence, academic achievement and behaviour management were used as a way to operationalize and understand resilient behaviour. In the literature protective factors are described as the presence of particular factors that buffer and protect against risk factors. Examples of protective factors are peers, teachers, counsellors, intelligence, and cultural/religious affiliation. From the results of this study, key protective factors for these children were additional internal family support systems, particularly grandparents, stepparents or other extended family members. Other protective factors for these children included external support systems, (e.g., involvement with hobbies or extra-curricular activities). Clinicians working with this population can utilize the above information to work in conjunction with the family. If the clinician is using a family-centred approach to practice, i.e., using interventions designed to work towards participation and empowerment of family members, s/he can discuss with the custodial, the non-custodial parent and the child how to implement strategies ensuring that these protective factors are put into place. For example, the clinician could support a newly blended family by offering parenting classes to the parent and stepparent, thereby helping them to better understand the needs of the child and help them to form a cohesive family unit. In turn, the emotional support from the primary parent and stepparent could help the child utilize his/her resilient traits, i.e., provide the necessary

emotional support to enable the child to feel self-confident and able to achieve social competence.

Children are active players in their own identity, thereby playing a role in their ongoing development. Within this study some of the children stated that they had not benefited from their counseling sessions with either psychologists or other counselors. As a way of respecting the child's knowledge and interdependence, the child should be consulted with respect to what external resources they could best utilize. As well, it is necessary to understand which support systems need to be augmented, in an effort to fully support the existing resources for a particular family. External support systems for the child could include children's support groups, cultural activities, extra-curricular activities or becoming involved in a neighborhood community center. Policy changes may need to be made in an effort to make the above resources available as many communities do not have access to children's support groups or appropriate cultural activities. It is incumbent upon the clinician or social worker to continue to ensure that the child's voice is heard with respect to what resources are needed to ensure the child's needs are met. This can occur through ongoing discussions with the child.

Children also need to be heard with respect to the amount of time that they want to spend with each parent. Smart (2002) suggests that we need to seriously consider what children say in relation to divorce proceedings. However, this may require a shift in the importance attached to the child's voice in the family. As a way of showing respect to the child, s/he needs to feel they have some input into the decision-making of a time-sharing plan between the parents. If the family is involved in a formal court-ordered custody/access assessment, the child needs to feel that their ideas/wishes have

been incorporated into a formal time-sharing plan. This could occur by the evaluator giving the child feedback after the assessment was completed. As well, the parents need to listen to the child with respect to how s/he wants to move back and forth between the two homes, particularly when the child is able to formulate opinions and arguments about this issue. While it is important to talk to the child about the adults having the final "say" in this issue, the child needs to know that their desires and needs are also important. This will allow him/her to feel a part of the decision-making process in the family, thereby strengthening his/her sense of family coherence and identity.

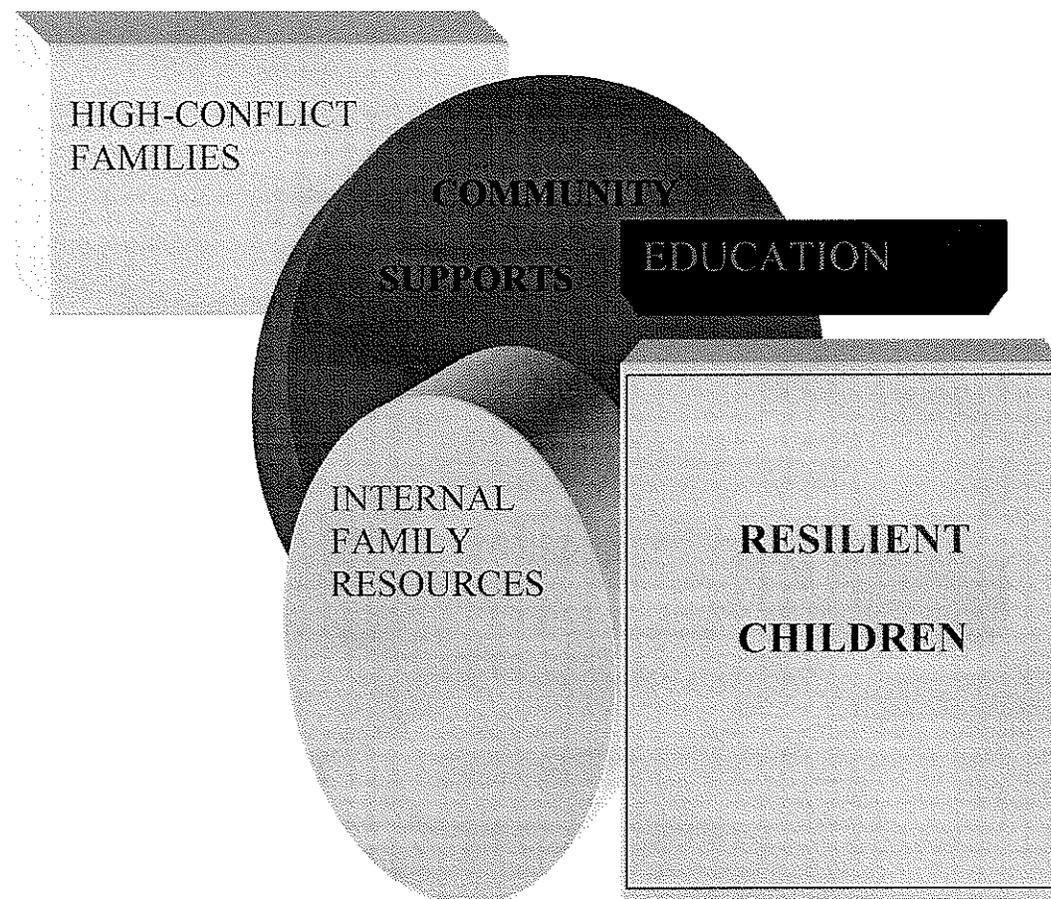
Other authority figures, such as judges may need more information on protective factors and how they can provide support for children from these families. Education to the judiciary and family law lawyers could help them to become aware of the role of both internal and external resources necessary for these children. Custody evaluators could be instrumental in assessing for these factors and then providing the information through their reports to the Court. Guidelines for custody evaluators could ensure that questions were asked both of the child and the parents with respect to stepparent involvement and the children's relationships to extended family members.

The literature and past research on resilience discusses the importance of 'building' or 'growing resilience', i.e., ensuring that protective factors are put into place in order for children to maximize their ability to use their resilient characteristics at a time of crisis or family transition. Figure IV provides a conceptual view of how clinicians and other stakeholders could provide a framework from which the children and families could incorporate protective factors into their lives.

**FIGURE IV**  
**BUILDING RESILIENCE**

**KEY STRATEGIES:**

- ❖ Educate families.
- ❖ Build or use existing resources within families.
- ❖ Make community resources and social or cultural supports available to children.



Building resilience begins with education for all family members.

Implementing the protective factor of education helps all family members understand how interparental conflict can affect children. Becoming educated about the possibilities for change and growth is a positive step for all family members. It is a protective factor by ensuring that appropriate information is provided to help with decision-making and lifestyle changes. Education should include mandatory parent education seminars after a separation. In some provinces this is already in place. In Manitoba, although these seminars are offered, they are not yet mandatory for all separating parents. It could also include education through the school for the children, thereby allowing the children an opportunity to understand changes after a parental separation and helping them find ways to cope with conflict situations. Providing this through the school system alleviates the stigma attached to attending these groups.

Another way of providing support to this population is through strengthening the family structure. If families are to stay connected or feel they can manage the transition of parental separation, they need the support of the community. Family reconstitution, including blended families, may need the encouragement and understanding of the community in order to make a successful transition. For example, the role of stepparents is a difficult one. Stepparents are often unsure how to relate with children from a previous relationship. They may not want to take on the role of 'parent', but do not just want to be a 'friend'. Blended families often need help in order to form a cohesive unit and provide a sense of connectedness to all the new family members. This can be a daunting task. However, the results from this study suggest that stepparents are often vital to the emotional security of the children. The children

discussed the importance of attachments to new family members. Therefore, for this population, stepparents need affirmation and support as they move into the role of 'friend', 'parent' and 'guardian' of these children. This support may need to come from external resources, particularly community agencies or clinicians working with these families. This may necessitate that clinicians be further educated with respect to the needs of these families in order to provide guidance with the re-organization of family structures.

At the time of the separation, parents need to find alternate support systems to help with the family transition. They often turn to extended family. As the results of this study suggest, grandparents and step-grandparents play a positive role in the child's ability to recover from this transition. As was found through Family #6, the child found a secure attachment through her paternal grandmother and was better able to recover from separation and ongoing interparental conflict due to this relationship. However, due to the conflict between the parents, some grandparents find it difficult to maintain contact with the children. For example, a mother may attempt to undermine the relationship with the paternal grandparents. In turn, this results in a loss of contact between the child and grandparents. At the present time the legal system is in the process of changing laws relating to access between children and grandparents in order to ensure ongoing contact and protect the relationship between these family members. These legislative changes may help to strengthen the relationship between the grandparents and children as well as providing a positive and secure environment. Based on the results of this study, these relationships can provide a secure refuge for the children.

Extra-curricular activities are a key protective factor in building resilience.

Structured voluntary activities are often an important but neglected domain of resilience and practice in positive youth development and in the building of resilience. Giving children the chance to incorporate structured activities into their lives allows them to feel connected to their peers as well as providing them with a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem. It also provides them with an external environment that is free of the interparental conflict. Examples of these activities are youth groups, church groups, Scouts or Guides, as well as other clubs that teach and validate skill development.

Within this population, learning alternate coping skills would also help the children to manage the effect of ongoing parental conflict. For example, children who witness this degree of conflict often have difficulty managing their own behaviour. They may need to learn alternative forms of conflict resolution. They have witnessed a great deal of conflict between their parents which has remained unresolved. They need to learn how to successfully negotiate conflict, i.e., learn new conflict resolution skills. They may need role models that allow them to understand how to better manage conflict. This may happen through witnessing how a stepparent resolves conflict with their parent. Alternatively, the child may need a mentor to show them a different way of resolving conflict. This could be in the form of a 'Big Brother' or 'Big Sister', an adult that comes into their lives and spend time with them on a weekly basis. New skills that include managing conflict between peers or family members could also be taught in the classroom or through specifically designed children's therapeutic/educational groups. Through these groups children learn alternative ways of managing feelings such as anger and sadness. This allows them to better understand and channel their feelings

through alternative methods (e.g., participating in sporting activities, taking care of pets or spending time with friends). As discussed earlier, an example of how one child found a different way of understanding conflict is provided from one of the children in this study. He decided to become a conflict manager at school in an attempt to help others learn how to manage their anger.

### **Future Research with Children of High-conflict Separated or Divorced Parents**

Through this study a substantive level theory was postulated. Although the tenets of this theory are not inconsistent with other results from resilience research, it needs to be further tested through intervention studies. This is supported by Masten (1999) who suggests that the central task for this generation of resilience researchers is to test theories through intervention studies. As the theoretical proposition from this study was developed in conjunction with a particular population, it can be tested through specific interventions with these families. In turn, these interventions could be evaluated. For example, an intervention could be designed that included a clinician working with family members in an attempt to support the internal family structure over a period of family re-organization and reconstitution. The rationale for this intervention would include helping family members to find a sense of coherence and use their strengths at the time of the transition. Evaluating this intervention could include both qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, children could be given self-reporting quantitative instruments that indicate their level of resilience both before and after the intervention. As well, the children and parents could have in-depth discussions with the evaluator both before and after the intervention in an attempt to give meaning

to changes supported by the clinician. The intervention would be evaluation-based, providing feedback on the changes within the family and on the ongoing role of the clinician. The results of this evaluation could provide some answers with respect to whether resilient attributes of the children from these families could be enhanced or created through intervention.

As well as creating intervention studies, other research studies are recommended with this population. For example, an attempt could be made to understand the role of formal helpers with these families. Court appointed evaluators and members of the judiciary are put into place to provide support to family members. However, there is very little research in this area. More information is needed before we can understand if these formal helpers are protective factors buffering family members from the interparental conflict.

Another potential research study could include families in which there are both low and high levels of conflict. Children's way of coping and exhibiting resilient characteristics could then be compared. This information would allow for a richer understanding of how the interparental conflict inhibits the children's way of coping.

A different way of completing research with this population is through longitudinal studies. As an example, a follow-up study to this one could be implemented in three to five years. By that time all the children involved in this study would have entered adolescence. Discussions with the children and parents at that time would reveal whether the children were able to sustain or enhance their resilient attributes. As well, a follow-up study could address the question of how resilient

characteristics change when children enter a different developmental stage. This type of study would build on the substantive-level theory that emerged from this study.

Other examples of future research include broadening the sample used in this study by using different age groups of children. However, it would not be feasible to attempt to interview children much younger than those in this study, as children under the age of eight often have a difficult time understanding complex issues and discussing their feelings about particular situations.

While there are likely many more possibilities for studying this population, it is essential to consider the difficulties in recruiting research participants. Due to the ongoing conflict between the parents, they are likely to be unable to agree to both be part of a study. As was evident from this study, they may also disagree to allow their child to be part of a study. These roadblocks suggest that this area is a difficult one in which to complete new research. Nevertheless, by persevering and designing a practical research design, other studies with this population could be completed.

## **Conclusions**

Results from this study have been both rewarding and stimulating. From the process of data collection to data management and finally to data analysis, the work has proved interesting and fruitful. The idea for this study originated from the need to find ways of understanding how or why some children appeared to function better than others when in a continual environment of interparental conflict. Grounded theory was chosen as the way to collect and analyze the information gained from the research participants. It allowed for a systematic application of research in the area of resilience.

The slight modification to grounded theory in this study suggested a need for a priori definition of resilience. This focused the research on the interactional component of resilience, i.e., how the interactions of family and community members promote resilience in children. Throughout the data analysis the analytical methods associated with grounded theory, i.e., open, axial and selective coding, allowed for a rigorous, yet realistic way of understanding the information received through the data collection process. Finally, through the development of a theoretical proposition, a way of understanding the interrelationships of the concepts was realized. As an end result, ideas related to resilience and protective factors were obtained.

Initially it was difficult to find enough research participants for this study. However, after considerable effort twelve families agreed to be part of this study. In the end, the information gained was very rich. Results from this study can enable both clinicians and policy makers to make more informed decisions regarding the needs of this population. For example, through the focus group the parents discussed their need for better access to resources for all the family members. One parent described her need in the following way:

I know that the best place for me to talk with the child's father would be in a mediation setting. But I think that I am just going to get too angry to talk with him even in that setting. So I am not ready for that yet. I don't want him to see how mad he gets me. So I need something to get me ready for mediation. But I don't know where to go for that or who to ask that could tell me.

Another parent talked about the difficulty in trying to understand what resources the children might need or want to access. She stated:

I am not really sure that my children even need any extra help coping with the problems in our family since the separation. But I don't know what to look for, what behaviours that might tell me they are having problems.

Both of these parents were searching for the appropriate resources that would help either themselves or their children cope with the ongoing parental conflict. Later in the group discussion the parents agreed there was a need for a location or directory from which information about community resources could be accessed. As well as needing a list of resources, they wanted a way in which to understand how these resources could be helpful to individual family members. Suggestions were made that this directory with corresponding educative material should be located in libraries or on web site as it would then be accessible to the general public. This focus group discussion underlines the importance of the availability of resources for this population. For example, there needs to be a way in which families can receive some education with respect to both the detrimental effects of ongoing interparental conflict as well as how to enhance the resilient attributes of children. While some community resources are already in place, many others need to be developed. Parents need to be able to access these resources when necessary. Children need a secure, safe place to talk about family issues and the ongoing interparental conflict. If this were readily available through the school, the children would have the opportunity to gain support, guidance and peer support, without feeling the stigma of being the 'one in the family with the problem'. The parents could then feel that their children's needs were being met in this regard.

While this study provided a great deal of information on resilience, there are several limitations that need to be considered in interpreting these results. For example, the small sample size only allowed for the beginning of an understanding of the protective factors and how they are connected to the issue of resilience in this population. As well, the sample's relatively homogeneous nature did not allow for a

thorough understanding of the issues connected to resilience and cultural affiliation.

Due to the nature of interparental conflict it was difficult to obtain interviews with both parents in most of these families. Hearing the stories of both parents could have provided more information about the impact of all family members and how they help the children cope with the environment of interparental conflict.

Throughout this dissertation, there has been an attempt to both define and operationalize the concept of resilience. It has proven helpful to use the idea of protective factors in understanding resilient behaviour. In addition, as demonstrated through this study, children's resilience varies somewhat over time. When family changes occurred, the children's ability to cope depended on the support of family members. For example, the child who had a positive, supportive relationship with her stepmother had difficulties in her academic studies and with her siblings when the father separated from the stepmother. This suggests that a child's resilience is not a static concept and may change depending on the circumstances of the family or external support system. The findings from this study also suggest that the concept of resilience needs further study. For example, it is difficult to fully understand how protective factors can provide an adequate buffer against the risk factors, particularly when some of the protective factors are removed. Do other protective factors take their place or does the individual simply rebound in time as other positive family transitions help to buffer against the loss of the supportive family member? Alternatively, does the individual lose part of her capacity for resilient behaviour when this protective factor is no longer in place? A longitudinal perspective in the form of another study may help to answer these questions.

The results of this study have provided some valuable insights into how children cope and continue to do well in an environment of interparental conflict. By disseminating these results, clinicians and other stakeholders will be able to use the findings to find alternative ways of working with high conflict separated or divorced families in ways that promote the successful adjustment of the children. Children can only be heard if we listen, both to the impact of ongoing interparental conflict and what they need to help them cope with it.

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**APPENDIX A**

**CHILDREN'S PRE-SCREENING INTERVIEW**

## **Pre-screening interview**

### **Self-esteem/Self-efficacy**

1. Compared to other children does your child seem happy and hopeful (optimistic) even when life becomes difficult?
2. Is your child a helpful person to others? How does she/he help out within the family? Is she/he more or less helpful than her/his siblings?
3. How does your child deal with everyday stress and problems? Do you see other children finding better/alternative ways of coping than your child?
4. Does your child appear to feel good about her/himself? If so, how does she/he show this? Has this changed since the separation?

### **Academic Achievement**

5. How does your child do in school? Does she/he obtain grades that are appropriate for her level? Has this changed since your separation from the other parent?
6. How does your child relate to her peers at school? Does she/he get along or does she/he have problems with them at school or in the community?

### **Social Competence**

7. Can your child manage to get to school on time and complete her homework?
8. Would you describe your child as being good at problem solving? How does she/he show you this skill?
9. Does your child appear to be able to perform everyday tasks? Has this changed since the separation?

### **Socially Appropriate Conduct**

10. Does your child exhibit any behavior problems? If so, what are they and how are they managed? Are they different problems from his/her friends?
11. Does your child ever appear depressed or withdrawn? How often? When do you notice it the most?

12. Is your child on any medication in an effort to manage his/her behavior?
13. Do your children get into a lot of disagreements with each other. If so, how are they handled?
14. Have your child's teachers or counselors suggested that he/she has problems managing his/her behavior?
15. In the past how did your child react when you and the other parent argued?
16. Have there been any changes in your child's behavior since the separation? Has this been a cause for concern?

**APPENDIX B**

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Date

Dear:

Currently I am completing research on resilience in children from separated or divorcing families. I understand that you have worked with a counselor either in the present or the past at Family Conciliation in an attempt to resolve your concerns about your child or children. This research is not part of your work with a counselor at Family Conciliation. It is simply an attempt to gather information about how children cope with issues related to conflict between their separated parents.

I would like to offer you and your family an opportunity to be part of my research. Please see the enclosed flyer for further information about this research. As well as receiving a monetary honorarium for being part of this study, I could give you feedback on your child's coping abilities and how to enhance them.

If you would like more information about this study or would like to be a part of it, please contact me directly at

Thank-you for taking the time to consider this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Marlene Pomrenke, MSW

Enclosure

**APPENDIX C**  
**RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER**

## **RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**

### **HONARIUMS OFFERED**

If you and the other parent continue to be in conflict, your participation would be valued in a research project that focuses on understanding how children cope with this conflict. The following criteria is necessary for you to be part of this project:

- ◆ **You have a child between 9 and 12 years of age. This child exhibits some coping skills.**
- ◆ **You and the other parent have been separated for at least one year.**
- ◆ **You would agree to be part of this project by being interviewed.**
- ◆ **You would agree to your child being interviewed.**

Marlene Pomrenke is the principal researcher for this project. She is a doctoral student completing this research through Family Conciliation. This research focuses on understanding the resilience of children in families that continue to be in conflict after the separation or divorce.

If you wish to discuss this opportunity further, please contact **Marlene Pomrenke** at

**APPENDIX D**

**SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CHILDREN**

## **Children's Semi-structured Interview**

### **I. Prior to the Separation**

- What do you remember most about your parents before they separated?
- Was your family different before the separation than it is now? What is better or worse about it?

### **II. Changes After Separation**

- How have things changed since your parents separated? For example, have you moved or changed schools?
- What has helped you get through these changes?
- How often do you see each parent?
- What is your current relationship like with your mother and your father? Has this changed since the separation? If so, how?
- What is your relationship like with your brother? Your sister? Has this changed since the separation. If so, how?

### **III. Ways of Coping with Parental Conflict & Separation**

- Do you remember hearing your parents argue before they separated? If so, what did you do when they argued? For example, did you know what they were arguing about? Did you try and avoid being around them when they were arguing? Have you ever tried to stop your parents from arguing?
- What did your siblings do when your parents argued?

- Do your parents still argue with each other? If so, how does that make you feel?  
What do they argue about? What do you do when they argue? Do you try and stop them or avoid being around them? Have you every talked to either one of them about it?
- How would you handle conflict? For example, if you got into a disagreement with a friend or sibling, how would you work it out?
- What do you do to make yourself feel better when you are upset about what is happening in your family? For example, do you talk about the separation? If so, to whom and when?
- What have your parents done or said to help you handle their separation? What would you like them to do?
- How do you feel about your parents' separation? What type of impact has it had on your daily life?
- What makes you feel good about your family?
- What do you do that makes your feel good about yourself?
- Do you have a religion or culture that you feel connected to? If so, how does that make you feel about yourself?

#### **IV. Barriers to Coping with Parental Conflict**

- Does anything prevent you from doing as well as you would like to in school?
- What could your parents do to help you when you don't feel like doing your homework or going to school?

- Does either of your parent's talk to you about the other one? If so, what is said about the other one?
- Do you ever behave badly? What is it that makes you misbehave in school or at home? How could that be changed?

#### **V. Peer and Community Resources**

- Which people in your life have been most helpful to you since your parents' separation? Explain how they have helped you. What has this meant to you?
- If you had a problem, whom would you go to for help? Why?
- How are things going for you at school? Do you have friends at school? If so, do you see them after school? Are you involved with any extracurricular activities at school? If so, how is that decided?
- What is your relationship like with your teacher? Do you feel you can go to her/him if you need to do so?
- Have you ever seen a school counsellor or someone else that you could talk to when you felt the need for help from outside your family? If so, what was that like for you?
- What words of advice do you have for other children going through their parents' separation?

**APPENDIX E**

**SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS**

## **Parent's Semi-structured Interview**

### **I. Conflict Prior to the Separation**

- What was your relationship like with the other parent?
- Was there any conflict between you and the other parent? If so, what type of conflict?
- What part of the conflict did your child witness? How did she/he react to it? Did this affect her behaviour at school, at home, or with her peers?
- Did the conflict between you and the other parent affect the amount of time and energy you could give to your child? If so, how?

### **II. Changes Since the Separation**

- What is your relationship like with the other parent? Do you communicate with him/her? If so, how and is there any conflict during that communication?
- How often does your child see the other parent?
- Have you noticed any behavioural changes in your child since the separation? If so, what are the changes and how have you reacted to them?
- Have the child's teachers or extended family noticed any changes in your child's behaviour since the separation?
- Does your child have any problems getting ready for school, getting his/her homework completed or doing household chores since the separation?
- Have there been any changes in your child's sleeping patterns, eating habits or personal appearance since the separation? If so, what has changed?

- Have there been any changes between your child and her/his brothers or sisters since the separation?
- What have been the biggest changes in your family since the separation?

### **III. Adaptation to the Separation**

- How do you think your child has coped with your separation? For example, what has helped or hindered him/her over the past few years?
- What are the strengths in your family?
- How has your child coped with the ongoing conflict between you and the other parent?
- How does your child do in school? What do his/her teachers say about his academic progress? Is your child involved in any extra-curricular activities? If so, has this been something that your child requested? Does your child enjoy these activities?
- What other systems, i.e., judicial, legal and community, have been part of your attempts to resolve the conflict between you and the other parent? How have they been helpful to the process? Have the children been part of your efforts to resolve the conflict? If so, how?
- Have you used any outside resources, i.e., counsellors, in an attempt to receive support or guidance for either yourself or the children? If so, how has this been helpful?
- What has been the most difficult aspect of the separation for you? How has this impacted on your relationship with your child?

- What do you think are your child's strengths? How has he/she been able to move forward successfully despite what has been happening in your family? What might be some barriers to your child moving forward and how could you contribute toward removing those barriers?

**APPENDIX F**

**SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COLLATERAL CONTACTS**

## COMMUNITY MEMBERS INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Semi-Structured interview:

1. How do you know this child?
2. What has been your level of involvement with him/her? For example, have you provided counseling to him/her and for how long?
3. Have you had any involvement with other family members? If so, to what degree and for what purpose?
4. What is your general impression of this child? How have you come to your assessment of this child? For example, is it based on discussions with her/him, observations, or discussions with other family members?
5. Did you know this child before his/her parents separated? If so, do you notice any changes in her/her behaviour or ability to complete tasks and move forward?
6. What impresses you the most about this child? Do you have any concerns about him/her? If so, how do you think he/she could overcome obstacles in his/her path?
7. Has this child ever discussed his/her parents' conflict? If so, in what context?
8. Please comment on how you view this child's coping abilities and what may have helped them to cope with their parent's ongoing conflict?

**APPENDIX G**  
**CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS**

Principal Investigator: Marlene Pomrenke #  
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brad McKenzie # 474-8767

## CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Marlene Pomrenke has explained to me that she, as a doctoral student with the University of Manitoba, is conducting a study that will add to our knowledge about the experiences and strengths of families who remain in conflict after their separation or divorce. I understand that the primary purpose of this research is to attempt to understand how the children in these families cope with their parents' conflict. Ms. Pomrenke or her research advisor, Dr. McKenzie can be reached at the above numbers if there are any questions or concerns at any time during this study.

My participation in this study will include one or two interviews with Marlene Pomrenke. As well, I give my consent for her to read any files connected to our work with Family Conciliation or through the Court of Queen's Bench, Family Division. Additionally, I consent to being contacted to be part of a focus group at a later stage in this project. If it is necessary to contact a community member that has been helpful to our family I will sign a separate consent form in order that this may happen. The above interviews will be approximately an hour and a half in length and will be held on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of 405 Broadway at the offices of Family Conciliation.

I will receive \$25.00 as an honorarium for taking part in these interviews.

I also give my consent for my child to be part of this study. This will include interviews between Marlene Pomrenke and the child. As well, my child can attend a focus group with other children that are part of this project. These interviews will also take place at the offices of Family Conciliation. My child's participation is voluntary and he/she has the right to participate in this study to the extent to which he/she feels comfortable. He/she has the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Ms. Pomrenke will not be a part of any future work with my family through her role as assessor or mediator at Family Conciliation. However, I understand that Ms. Pomrenke may at some time in the future be called to court to testify to her involvement with my family and her findings with respect to her discussions with our family members. I also understand that Ms. Pomrenke is obliged to report any instances of abuse or neglect to Child and Family Services.

Ms. Pomrenke will remove all identifying information about my family from her final research reports.

My participation in this study is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from it at any time. I understand that everything my children and I say will remain confidential. The only people having access to my personal information is Marlene

Pomrenke and those working with her on this research project. Once this information is analyzed, all identifying information will be destroyed.

I will receive verbal or written feedback with respect to the results of this research from the principal researcher either during or at the end of the project.

This research study has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. Any complaint regarding a procedure may be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat (474-7122).

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX H**

**ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN**

Faculty of Social Work

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Fax (204) 474-7594

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: MARLENE POMRENKE #  
FACULTY ADVISOR: DR. BRAD McKENZIE #474-8767

**CONSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN IN RESEARCH STUDY**

Marlene Pomrenke has explained to me that she is a doctoral student at the University of Manitoba and is doing a research project. This project is part of an effort to understand how I have coped with my parents' separation and/or divorce. She has explained that she wants to try and find out what has helped children cope with the separation and the conflict between parents. She can be reached at \_\_\_\_\_ if I have any questions after my meeting with her.

I agree to at least one meeting of about an hour in length with Ms. Pomrenke. This meeting will occur at the offices of Family Conciliation. I know that Ms. Pomrenke will ask me questions about my parents, particularly about how I feel about the conflict between them. I understand that this information will be confidential. After our first meeting I will decide if I want to be part of a meeting with other children who are in the same situation as me. Ms. Pomrenke refers to this meeting as a focus group.

I understand that if I talk about being abused that Ms. Pomrenke will have to talk to the appropriate authorities in order that I remain safe.

I will receive \$15.00 for taking part in this interview, and another \$10.00 if I decide to take part in a focus group with other children.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from it at any time. Any information with my name or my family's name will be removed after Ms. Pomrenke has finished her work on this project.

Ms. Pomrenke will contact me after we meet to ensure that she has understood what I said in our meetings.

This research study has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. Any complaints about this project may be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat (474-7122).

Signed:

Date:

Principal Investigator:

Date:

**APPENDIX I**  
**CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP**

## Faculty of Social Work

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Fax (204) 474-7594

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: MARLENE POMRENKE #  
FACULTY ADVISOR: DR. BRAD McKENZIE #474-8767

### **CONSENT FORM/FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT**

Marlene Pomrenke has explained to me that she, as a doctoral student with the University of Manitoba, is conducting a study that will add to our knowledge about the experiences and strengths of families who remain in conflict after their separation or divorce. I understand that the primary purpose of this research is to attempt to understand how the children in these families cope with their parents' conflict. Ms. Pomrenke or her research advisor, Dr. McKenzie can be reached at the above numbers if there are any questions or concerns at any time during this study.

I give my consent to be part of a focus group, a part of this research. This focus group will be approximately two hours in length and will take place at 405 Broadway, at the offices of Family Conciliation. The information obtained through this focus group will be used to further the research explained above.

I will receive \$20.00 as an honorarium for being part of this focus group.

Ms. Pomrenke has explained to me that while confidentiality will be discussed as a priority with the other group members, it can not be ensured. I understand this and still agree to participate in the meeting.

Ms. Pomrenke will remove all identifying information about my family from her final research reports.

My participation in the focus group is voluntary and I have the right to leave the meeting at any time.

This research study has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. Any complaint regarding a procedure may be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat (474-7122).

Signed:

Date:

Principal Investigator:

Date:

**APPENDIX J**

**LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM BOARD OF ETHICS**

06 January 2004

**To:** Marlene Pomrenke  
Principal Investigator

**FROM:** K. Duncan, Interim Chair  
Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)

**Re:** Protocol #J2003:153  
"Exploring Resilience in Children of High-conflict, Separated or Divorced  
Parents"

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The above-noted protocol now meets minimal ethical standards and the Approval Certificate is attached. The board, however, cautions you to remain vigilant to the vulnerability of the research participants throughout the research process. It is easy to confuse the researcher and clinician roles. More concerted effort than usual is needed because this research involves much more than minimal risk for these families and for you, the researcher.

Attach.

**APPENDIX K**

**SAMPLE OF FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

### *Introductory Question*

Share how your child has been able to cope with the situation between you and the other parent in a positive way.

### *Key Questions*

I.

To what degree is your child involved in the conflict between you and the other parent?

- How much is your child part of this conflict?
- How do other family members cope with this conflict?
- What strategies does your child use to cope with this conflict?

II.

Support of family and community.

- Who does your child receive the most support from within the family or community?
- Why or why not would your child use outside support systems?
- What type of ongoing support would benefit your child?

III

Resources needed for your family

- What resources are needed for your child to cope with the ongoing conflict?
- What will happen if these resources are not in place?
- What recommendations do you have for changes in the support and resources available to your family?