



ASSOCIATION OF  
FAMILY AND  
CONCILIATION COURTS



**eNEWS**

## Ask the Experts: Tips on Identifying Methodologically Sound Research

*Marsha Kline Pruett, PhD, MSL and Michael Saini, MSW, PhD*

No study is perfect or free from biases. Although methodological perfection is not a realistic threshold for determining the inclusion of scientific evidence, family law professionals need to distinguish stronger from weaker evidence in order to determine the weight to be given to research studies. We propose the following tips for identifying methodologically sound research in order to evaluate potential biases in accordance with how studies were conducted and reported. The intent of the tips is to assist family law practitioners in identifying common errors that can influence the results of a study. [Read more.](#)

## AFCC 12th Symposium on Child Custody Evaluations

Make your plans now to attend the AFCC 12th Symposium on Child Custody Evaluations, *Abuse, Alienation, and Gatekeeping: Critical Issues for Family Court Professionals*, November 3-5, 2016.

MONTHLY E-  
NEWSLETTER  
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September 2016

### Upcoming AFCC Conferences



### AFCC 12th Symposium on Child Custody Evaluations

*Abuse, Alienation, and  
Gatekeeping: Critical  
Issues for Family Court  
Professionals*  
November 3–5, 2016

Take advantage of the early bird rate when you register before or your registration is postmarked **by October 3, 2016**, and save up to \$50.

[View the brochure](#)

[Book your stay](#)

[Register today!](#)

## **Atlanta Plenary Preview: Parent-Child Contact Problems: News You Can Use**

*William Bernet, MD, Leslie M. Drozd, PhD, Michael Saini, MSW, PhD, Matthew J. Sullivan, PhD*

Learn the latest perspectives and challenges of one of the most difficult issues in the field of family law: parent-child contact problems. Friday morning at the 12th Symposium for Child Custody Evaluations, the plenary session, "Parent-Child Contact Problems: News You Can Use," will feature leaders in the field speaking about recent research and views on the spectrum of alienation, estrangement, and parent-child contact problems. Participants will gain a greater understanding of the dynamics that contribute to children's contact refusal and learn about different interventions for specific refusal dynamics in a family that exhibits parent-child contact problems. You won't want to miss it!

## **Member Profile: Matt Kiernan**

Matt Kiernan can testify to the powerful role mentorship has played in his professional life. As the beneficiary of decades-long mentorship with the Honorable Gail Prudenti, Matt now has the opportunity to guide law students in his new role as Faculty Administrative Editor of Family Court Review at Hofstra University, a responsibility he doesn't take lightly. "You have to try to help students find their strengths," Matt says. "It's important to identify strengths early on so they can play strongly into their career goals." [Read more.](#)

## **AFCC 54th Annual Conference**

*Turning the Kaleidoscope of Family*

*Conflict into a Prism of Harmony*

May 31-June 3, 2017

Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston, MA

Sheraton Atlanta Hotel  
Atlanta, Georgia

### **AFCC 54th Annual Conference**

*Turning the Kaleidoscope of Family Conflict into a Prism of Harmony*

May 31-June 3, 2017

Boston, Massachusetts

### **AFCC Chapter Conferences**

#### [Wisconsin Chapter Annual Conference](#)

September 16, 2016

Pewaukee, Wisconsin

#### [Florida Chapter Annual Conference](#)

September 28-30, 2016

Orlando, Florida

#### [Indiana Chapter Annual Conference](#)

October 7, 2016

Indianapolis, Indiana

#### [Colorado Chapter Annual Conference](#)

October 7-9, 2016

Breckenridge, Colorado

#### [Ontario Chapter Annual Conference](#)

October 21, 2016

Toronto, Ontario

#### [Arizona Chapter Annual Conference](#)

January 27-29, 2017

Sedona, Arizona

#### [California Chapter Annual Conference](#)

February 10-12, 2017

Costa Mesa, California

AFCC is accepting proposals for 90-minute workshop sessions for the AFCC 54th Annual Conference, Turning the Kaleidoscope of Family Conflict into a Prism of Harmony, May 31-June 3, 2017, at the Sheraton Boston Hotel. **Only 9 days remain to submit a proposal!** Proposals must be submitted using the [online form](#) and must be received by Friday, September 30, 2016.

[View the call for proposals and submission instructions.](#)

### **Boston Exhibit and Advertising Opportunities Available**

Exhibiting and advertising at the AFCC annual conference are excellent ways to share your products and services with an interdisciplinary community of family law professionals. Commit by **December 5, 2016** to ensure your exhibit or ad space is included in the program brochures, mailed out to over 25,000 family law professionals around the world.

[View the prospectus for sponsors, exhibits, and ad space.](#)

Please contact Program Coordinator, [Corinne Bennett](#), with any questions.

## **AFCC Webinar Series**

### *Emerging Issues in Relocation Cases*

October 13, 2016

1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

Philip M. Stahl, PhD, ABPP

Registration is closed. If you missed out on registering for this event, AFCC members can view a recording, as a member benefit, starting October 20. You can find the recording in the Member Center of the AFCC website.

### *Challenging Issues in Parenting Coordination*

December 14, 2016

1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

Debra Carter, PhD

**Registration will open on November 16, 2016, at 11:00am Eastern Time.**

For the complete schedule and titles of the upcoming webinar series, [click here](#).

Are you an AFCC member? [Join](#) or [Renew](#)

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To access Robin Deutch's recorded webinar, *Intimate Partner Violence and Child Custody Evaluation: The AFCC Guidelines*, go to the [Member Center](#) of the AFCC website.

## December Trainings

Registration Now Open

In collaboration with the University of Baltimore School of Law, December 5-6 and December 7-8, 2016. Each training is eligible for up to 12 hours of continuing education.

*Alcohol and Other Drugs: It's a Family Affair*

Judge Peggy Fulton Hora (Ret.)

Steve Hanson

December 5-6, 2016

*Managing Intractable Issue in Child Custody Disputes*

Robin M. Deutsch, PhD, ABPP

December 7-8, 2016

[View the brochure](#)

[Register now!](#)

## Chapter News:

*Correction:* Jana Aune Deach is the new President of the **Minnesota Chapter**. Congratulations Jana!

## Member News:

AFCC member **Judge Tony Capizzi** has been elected to serve as president elect of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

AFCC Meeting Manager, **Nicole Ellickson**, won the 2015-2016 Meeting Professionals International-Wisconsin Chapter Rising Star Award at their Annual Gala held on September 14th at Lambeau Field, in Green Bay. Nicole was recognized for her involvement in the community, MPI Wisconsin Chapter, and her proven track record of successfully planning meetings for AFCC. Congratulations Nicole!

## AFCC-AAML Conference 2017

Save the date! The AFCC-AAML Conference will be held September 14-16, 2017, in San Diego, California. [Check back](#)

[for more information.](#)



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## Ask the Experts:

### Tips on Identifying Methodologically Sound Research

*Marsha Kline Pruett, PhD, MSL and Michael Saini, PhD*

The volume of social science research in family law matters has increased dramatically over recent years. Research can help determine which interventions or approaches may be useful, effective, or even harmful for the families we serve. But before we put weight on the claims being made within scientific reports, it is important to assess whether the research was undertaken in a way that increased the likelihood of producing reliable and valid results. Critically appraising research studies involves assessing for the potential of biases, which includes investigating whether the findings might be due to the way the study was created and/or carried out. No study is perfect or free from biases. Although methodological perfection is not a realistic threshold for determining the inclusion of scientific evidence, family law professionals need to distinguish stronger from weaker evidence in order to determine the weight to be given to research studies. We propose the following tips for identifying methodologically sound research in order to evaluate potential biases in accordance with how studies were conducted and reported. The intent of the tips is to assist family law practitioners in identifying common errors that can influence the results of a study. This is in no way an exhaustive list of methodological factors to consider; it is intended to focus on markers of quality research and reporting of results.

- 1. Purpose of the research clearly described:** The first marker relates to the purpose of the research question: whether the topic is important, relevant, and of interest for a given question. It is common for authors to briefly state the research purpose in the abstract of the article, and again in more detail in the introduction. It may be phrased as a research question with hypotheses or it may be described as the general purpose for conducting the study. In either case, it should specify the nature of the population being studied, so the curious reader knows up front who is (and is not) the focus of the study.
- 2. Conflicts of interest of the authors are clearly described:** Conflicts of interest include any perceived advantage and/or benefit to the authors in presenting positive results. Conflict of interests can include funding sources and other financial ties (e.g. the author of the study is the developer of the intervention, employment, advocacy positions, etc.) To be in a conflict of interests does not automatically suggest that the research study is flawed, but nevertheless these

potential conflicts should be transparently disclosed to inform the reader about the potential for bias.

- 3. Balanced literature review:** A research study should include a literature review that is balanced, comprehensive, and consistent with the design and methodology of the study. Appropriate concepts are clearly defined. Gaps or inconsistencies in the literature are described. Primary (original) and secondary (someone citing someone else) sources are included and distinguished from one another. This may be evident by a citation.
- 4. Appropriate selection of research sample and methods:** There are several methods for conducting social science research and each of these methods correspond to specific research questions. For qualitative methods, the purpose is exploratory to gain an understanding of opinions and experiences of a select few without the focus of making inferences to a larger population. *Qualitative methods* help elucidate the facets of a relatively understudied problem. Smaller sample sizes and more information from each person is typical. *Quantitative methods* typically require larger samples so they have the sufficient power to detect statistical differences within the sample. Survey methods typically include random sampling of individuals to make inferences to the larger population. A survey is often as useful as its sample is broad or deep. Experimental studies (e.g. randomized controlled trials) randomly assign the sample to an intervention and control group to determine whether an intervention is effective for the intervention group compared to the group not receiving the intervention. Studies should include a clear rationale for choosing the research method based on the question being asked. The size of the sample should then be appropriate to the method selected. The sample should reflect the population identified in the purpose or question; for example, if the study is about father involvement, the information should be collected from fathers as well as mothers. Finally, a solid study specifies limits to the generalizability of findings based on the methods chosen and the sample obtained. When studying real life situations, many researchers cannot obtain the sample they hoped for, and that is not necessarily the fault of the researcher or the study. But the problems incurred in obtaining the sample and carrying out the study should be clearly identified.
- 5. Approval of Ethics Review Board:** Social science research should conform to research ethics board standards. Researchers should describe steps taken regarding ethical considerations, including how informed consent was obtained. If children or other vulnerable groups make up the sample, special provisions must often be made. A statement that an ethics review board has approved the study is usually sufficient. Researchers might also describe procedures for ensuring privacy and confidentiality, including how these were assured and maintained during and after the study.
- 6. Use of reliable and valid measurement:** Within quantitative research methods, measurement tools are instruments used by researchers to evaluate the

variables within the study. The best measures have been previously tested with a similar population (e.g. divorcing parents) and are considered reliable (measuring the same construct over time) and valid (assessing the intended construct). Reliability and validity are generally reported in the instruments section of a study, especially in higher quality journals.

- 7. Analysis of the results:** Any analysis, qualitative as well as quantitative, should follow a method that is explained and cited. For quantitative statistics, there are sample power analysis tests available to determine whether a sample is of sufficient size to detect a statistical difference. A p-value is noted for each analysis (a p-value explains the likelihood of a finding due to chance; a p value equal to or less than .05 is considered rigorous). The expected effect size and confidence intervals should be provided for the variables under consideration. A finding can be – and often is, in the social sciences – statistically significant but not clinically meaningful, and the effect size speaks to the distinction.
- 8. Balanced reporting of the results:** The research study should clearly indicate the methods for data analyses and a clear description of the results for all variables included. For qualitative results, quotes from participants and negative cases (that do not conform to the major themes) should be included in the results so the reader can assess whether the themes derived emerged from the participants' voices or were predetermined by the authors. For quantitative results, both significant and non-significant findings should be included in the results section to minimize the reporting of only positive findings.
- 9. Indication of clinical relevance:** Most studies include implications for policy and practice following their interpretation of the results, thereby situating the potential implications of their findings. Researchers are expected to describe how their findings are similar or different to those found in similar studies, and to what factors those similarities and differences might be attributable (different populations, instruments, ways of collecting data, etc.). Consumers of research can then better assess the potential clinical significance of the findings to the populations of most interest to them. It is also important to think about whether the researchers considered all the important intended and unintended consequences of their results.
- 10. Limitations addressed in the discussion of the paper:** Researchers should provide a description of the potential limitations of the study, including any limits on the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Typically, you will find the limitations in the discussion section of the study.

*Marsha Kline Pruett is a licensed clinical psychologist and the Maconda Brown O'Connor Professor at Smith College School for Social Work. She is researcher, mediator, and consultant to couples, attorneys, and judges. Dr. Kline Pruett has a*

*national reputation for the development, implementation, and evaluation of preventive interventions in courts and family-focused community agencies. She has written extensively for academic and lay audiences, coauthoring *Your Divorce Advisor* (2001) and *Partnership Parenting* (2009). She is a member of the board of editors of the *Family Court Review*. She was awarded the AFCC Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award in 2004. The California Supporting Fatherhood Involvement (SFI) project is currently a major focus of her intervention and research efforts.*

*Michael Saini is an Associate Professor and holds the endowed Chair of Law and Social Work at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. He is the Co-Director of the Combined J.D. and M.S.W. Program with the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto and the Course Director of the 48-hour Foundations of Custody Evaluations Program. He conducts custody evaluations, assists children's counsel for the Office of the Children's Lawyer, Ministry of the Attorney General in Ontario and he is a parent coach. He is also actively involved in family law related program evaluations. His publications have focused on high conflict, strained parent-child relationships, supervised visitation, virtual parenting time and parent competencies post separation and divorce.*



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## Member Profile: Matt Kiernan

Matt Kiernan can testify to the powerful role mentorship has played in his professional life. As the beneficiary of decades-long mentorship with the Honorable Gail Prudenti, Matt now has the opportunity to guide law students in his new role as Faculty Administrative Editor of *Family Court Review* at Hofstra University, a responsibility he doesn't take lightly. "You have to try to help students find their strengths," Matt says. "It's important to identify strengths early on so they can play strongly into their career goals."

Matt grew up on Long Island, the second eldest of six children with four brothers and one sister. His mother was a homemaker; his father, a partner in a communications corporation from which he eventually retired as president. Matt has fond memories of playing driveway basketball, and a busy neighborhood filled with children. "You could step out of the house and all the kids in the neighborhood would be playing. My mom would tell us to get outside, and not come back until dinner! I think I'm aging myself by sharing this," Matt said. A talented athlete, Matt took a serendipitous leap from high school basketball to the college level when his high school coach left for Johns Hopkins and recruited Matt to play for him there.

A lifelong New Yorker, Matt followed his undergraduate years at Johns Hopkins University at Villanova University School of Law. At Johns Hopkins, he studied history on the advice that it would prepare him for the rigors of law school. Matt remembers writing his undergraduate thesis (on a typewriter) comparing the conditions of the enslaved in the U.S. pre- and post-Emancipation Proclamation. Matt was able to identify his own strengths at an early age: he always knew he'd attend law school and his parents had their suspicions, too, having always known Matt to be "strongly opinionated." What Matt didn't anticipate is that one day he would be on the other side of the desk, mentoring and teaching young law students himself.

Matt began working at Hofstra University in February of 2016 along with his mentor, Judge Prudenti—a prominent New York judge who came to Hofstra from her role as Chief Administrative Judge of the Courts of New York State. Matt says that Judge Prudenti "inherited him" when both worked for the Suffolk County Surrogate's court in

the early 1990s. They have worked together ever since: from the Surrogate's Court, to the Office of the Public Administrator, to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, to the Office of Court Administration and, ultimately, to Hofstra University where Judge Prudenti is Executive Director of the Maurice A. Deane School of Law Center for Children, Families and the Law, and Matt serves as Director of Policy and Planning. When asked about his experience being mentored by Judge Prudenti, Matt relishes his good fortune and notes that she is "a star in the New York legal community and I'm happy to assist her, especially now at Hofstra." Judge Prudenti and Matt's professional relationship is one of mutual admiration, respect, and friendship—they have become close, and have even traveled together. Judge Prudenti attended the University of Aberdeen School of Law and was asked to speak, years later, at the grand opening of a new University library. Along with a group of the Judge's close friends, Matt and his wife accompanied her to Scotland, and he fondly remembers snapping a photo of the Judge and her husband shaking hands with the Queen.

Now, Judge Prudenti and Matt work together at the Center for Children, Families and the Law, originally founded by former *FCR* editor and AFCC member, Andrew Schepard. Matt shares excitedly that "Gail has really revitalized the center," citing new programs forthcoming. They are currently working on opening the Center for Separating and Divorcing Parents—set to launch this Fall 2016—modeled after the Resource Center for Separating and Divorcing Families at the University of Denver. Hofstra's Center for Separating and Divorcing Parents is proposed to be a "one-stop shopping opportunity for people of modest means experiencing marital difficulties." Matt hopes to empower parents to make decisions and serve low-income families' mediation needs, with a twist: Hofstra University students will provide services at the center. Longtime AFCC members Paul Meller, Associate Professor of Psychology at Hofstra, and Herbie DiFonzo, Professor of Law at Hofstra, will train students to mediate. The center is interdisciplinary—both psychology and law students work together to provide services, from mediation to assisting separating and divorcing couples with paperwork. The Center will also employ financial experts to assist with issues related to assets and property.

Another revitalization effort is a class Matt will co-teach with Judge Prudenti next Spring on 17A guardianship in New York state. In New York, when a developmentally delayed or disabled child comes of age, they need to have a guardian appointed for them. In the class, students will receive hands-on experience with this legal process. They will interview families looking to begin the guardianship process, help them with the necessary paperwork, and eventually appear before the judges to represent the family's wishes.

Matt's new position comes with two roles with the *FCR*: Adjunct Professor of the *FCR* Seminar, and Faculty Administrative Editor of the journal. Matt enjoys working with "true

professionals” Barbara Babb (new *FCR* Editor-in-Chief) and Robert Emery (*FCR* Social Science Editor), but insists that he’s “just the guy who makes the donuts” and that Barbara and Robert are the true experts in content. Matt is responsible for supervising the student staff, and making sure all pieces of the journal get to the appropriate parties on time for peer-review. Though his vision for *FCR* is still developing—Matt says he needs more experience with the journal before conjuring any visions of the future—his focus at this point is maintaining smooth operations. He credits the “fabulous student staff” with always going above and beyond.

His other role—professor—came as a surprise: although Matt has lectured to bar associations through the years, he has never formally taught in a classroom setting. Matt says that it can be “disconcerting to change professions in your 50s” and that his daughters were amused by the idea of him teaching a class. Matt quickly discovered that “teaching is not as daunting as one might think.” He teaches the *FCR* Seminar, a weekly class for second-year law students who want to become involved with the journal. Seminar students choose a family law-related topic and spend the year writing a note. They make weekly presentations to the class on the development of their note, as well. Ultimately, eight fortunate students will have their notes published in *FCR*. Matt hopes to, later this semester, bring in judges to assist with critique and help develop the students’ notes. Matt and the students also practice mock interviews to prepare those seeking summer internships, and he always reminds them to emphasize their involvement with *FCR*, noting its prestige and reputation. He says the students have been very welcoming. “Students are so full of energy that they energize you,” Matt muses, noting the differences between his Hofstra students and his time as a law student at Villanova: “Students today are much more committed and involved. When I applied to college, my resume was barely a page long and my only involvement was with basketball and student government. Now, students have four-, even five-, page resumes, chock full of charity projects, event planning, published works, travel, etc. It’s much more competitive now, and very impressive.”

Matt still loves basketball. He now plays in a men’s recreational league, and golfs, too. Matt also enjoys getting away at his in-laws’ quiet Maine home to cruise on the lake and indulge in some pleasure reading, as he does not have much time for recreational reading in his day-to-day life. The Maine home has giant laundry baskets full of novels left by visitors who finished them during their stay—a “free library” system for guests—and he has found many good reads hidden in the piles of forgotten paperbacks. In his daily life, Matt generally relies on his wife for book recommendations, and enjoyed the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series at her urging.

Matt and his wife, Cheryl, celebrate their 20th anniversary this year. The couple met when his sister introduced them. Cheryl went on to earn her MBA at New York University and now manages accounts for American Express. She is a big tennis fan,

and the couple recently had great fun entertaining some of her clients at the US Open. Matt and Cheryl plan to celebrate their anniversary in Napa Valley. The couple has three daughters, all of whom were surprised to hear they weren't invited to Napa, as the fivesome often take family vacations. Matt laughs and says he and Cheryl "have definitely earned this special anniversary trip." The couple recently took their family to London and Dublin and, before having children, they traveled more extensively, most notably to Hong Kong and Italy. They recently dropped off Caroline, their eldest, at George Washington University to begin her freshman year. They were "nerve-wracked and teary-eyed" but, of course, excited for Caroline to begin school. Athleticism runs in the family—Caroline plays lacrosse for GWU. Their middle daughter, Lizzy, is in the 9th grade, and their youngest, Gracie, in the 7th.

Throughout his professional life Matt has been enriched by his mentorship with Judge Prudenti, and he now, in his new role, has an opportunity to become the mentor. Matt has thoughts on both sides of the mentorship coin, and rightfully so. He always suggests to students that they develop an expertise, work hard, be prepared, and get involved. "If you work hard, good things will come. There are many ways to be successful. It's not just about making money, though making money is nice, too," Matt says with a chuckle.