

High conflict as a relationship-related stress process:
Neurobiological perspectives on attachment, mediation,
intervention and prevention. A scientific contribution to
child welfare, conflict resolution and prevention in highly
contentious parental conflicts

Jorge Guerra González
August 2026

[Hochstrittigkeit als bindungsbezogener Stressprozess: Neurobiologische
Perspektiven auf Bindung, Mediation, Intervention und Prävention.
Ein wissenschaftlicher Beitrag zu Kindeswohl, Konfliktbearbeitung und
Prävention in hochstrittigen Elternkonflikten]

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High conflict as a relationship-related stress process: Neurobiological perspectives on attachment, mediation, intervention and prevention. A scientific contribution to child welfare, conflict resolution and prevention in highly contentious parental conflicts

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Summary:

[This paper conceptualises high-conflict parental disputes as a relationship-related stress process by integrating neurobiological, developmental, legal psychological, and systemic perspectives. It argues that persistent interparental conflict and the intentional disruption of parent-child relationships constitute chronic stressors that may adversely affect children's emotional development, attachment security, and mental health. The article reviews the neurobiological foundations of attachment, stress regulation, and children's suggestibility, emphasising that children's expressed wishes must always be interpreted within the context of their attachment relationships and loyalty conflicts. The paper further discusses implications for family law, mediation, intervention, and prevention, advocating an evidence-based and interdisciplinary approach to high-conflict family disputes. It concludes that early interventions aimed at preserving secure parent-child relationships are essential for promoting child welfare and preventing long-term psychosocial harm.]

Key words: [High-conflict parental disputes, Attachment, Stress, Neurobiology, Child welfare, Parent-child relationship, Developmental psychology, Parental alienation, Mediation, Prevention, Family law
Interdisciplinary approach]

Zusammenfassung:

[Der Beitrag analysiert hochstrittige Elternkonflikte als bindungsbezogenen Stressprozess und verbindet neurobiologische, entwicklungspsychologische, rechtspsychologische und systemische Perspektiven. Ausgangspunkt ist die Annahme, dass anhaltende interparentale Konflikte sowie die gezielte Beeinträchtigung von Eltern-Kind-Bindungen chronischen Stress erzeugen, der sich nachteilig auf die emotionale Entwicklung, die Bindungssicherheit und die psychische Gesundheit von Kindern auswirken kann. Der Aufsatz diskutiert die neurobiologischen Grundlagen von Bindung, Stressregulation und Suggestibilität und verdeutlicht, weshalb kindliche Äußerungen stets im Kontext ihrer Bindungs- und Loyalitätsbeziehungen interpretiert werden müssen. Zudem werden familienrechtliche, mediative und präventive Implikationen erörtert. Der Autor plädiert für eine evidenzbasierte, interdisziplinäre Betrachtung hochstrittiger Familiendynamiken sowie für frühzeitige Interventionen, die den Erhalt sicherer Eltern-Kind-Bindungen und das Kindeswohl in den Mittelpunkt stellen.]

Schlüsselwörter: [Hochstrittige Elternkonflikte, Bindung, Stress, Neurobiologie, Kindeswohl, Eltern-Kind-Bindung, Entwicklungspsychologie, Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung, Mediation, Prävention, Familienrecht
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1. Abstract

Chronic, highly contentious parental conflict is one of the most significant risk factors for children's psychological development following separation and divorce. Whilst research has comprehensively documented its effects on mental health, social development and attachment security, the underlying neurobiological mechanisms have so far been integrated only to a limited extent into family court and family support discourses. This paper develops an integrative model that conceptualises high conflict as a chronic, attachment-related stress process.

Drawing on attachment theory, it is argued that chronic interparental conflict threatens the child's central security and regulatory systems. Drawing on findings from stress, developmental and neurobiological research, the paper illustrates how repeated threats to attachment can facilitate long-term adaptations in stress regulation, threat processing and social information processing. An analysis of recent neurobiological studies suggests that children in chronic conflict systems organise their development, in part, around coping with insecurity and loyalty conflicts.

Furthermore, the hypothesis is put forward that comparable attachment- and stress-related mechanisms may also be at work at the parental level. Although the empirical evidence for this is as yet limited, a cautious theoretical extrapolation appears plausible. This has implications for our understanding of mediation, reconciliation and conflict resolution. Chronic conflicts may not only be the subject of interventions, but may also alter the conditions necessary for successful interventions.

Finally, the paper argues that prevention is of greater importance than the retrospective management of conflict systems that have already become entrenched. Furthermore, the role of family court and family support institutions is critically examined. These systems do not merely react to conflicts, but become part of their dynamics. The central conclusion is that taking attachment-related and neurobiological processes into account can contribute to a broader understanding of high-conflict situations and open up new perspectives for the best interests of the child, prevention and family court practice.

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3. Introduction

Chronic, highly contentious parental conflict is one of the most significant sources of stress for children following a separation or divorce. Whilst the academic debate focused for many years on the effects of the separation itself, research now consistently shows that it is not the reorganisation of the family as such, but rather the duration, intensity and chronic nature of parental conflict that are associated with long-term risks to children's psychological, social and physical development (Harold & Sellers, 2018; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children from highly conflictual family systems are more likely to exhibit anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, behavioural problems, difficulties at school, psychosomatic complaints and problems with social integration than children whose parents, despite their separation, manage to resolve conflicts in a sufficiently cooperative manner (Davies & Martin, 2013; Harold & Sellers, 2018).

Despite these findings, high levels of conflict are still frequently understood primarily as a communication problem, a personality issue or a legal dispute. Consequently, many interventions focus on behavioural change, conflict resolution or judicial decision-making processes. Less attention, however, is paid to the question of what effects chronic family conflicts have on the biological and psychological systems that regulate human security, attachment and stress regulation. Yet it is precisely here that a key to understanding chronicity, escalation and the limited effectiveness of interventions might lie.

This study is based on the assumption that chronic high levels of conflict should not be understood exclusively as a social or legal conflict, but rather as an attachment-related stress process that triggers long-term neurobiological adaptations. These adaptations primarily affect children, whose dependence on their caregivers makes them particularly vulnerable. Research over recent decades provides increasingly robust evidence for this. Chronic family conflicts are associated with changes in emotional security, stress regulation and social information processing, as well as with neurobiological adaptation processes in brain regions that are significant for threat processing, emotion regulation and social cognition (McCrory & Viding, 2015; Teicher & Samson, 2016; Gong et al., 2021).

From an attachment theory perspective, this development appears plausible. Humans possess evolutionarily developed attachment systems whose central function is to establish security through closeness to relevant attachment figures (Bowlby, 1980, 1988). If these attachment systems are under constant threat, this gives rise not only to psychological distress but also to

physiological and neurobiological stress responses. Chronic parental conflict cannot therefore be understood solely as a dispute between adults. For children, it often means the repeated endangerment of those relationships on which their emotional security and psychological organisation depend to a significant extent.

The neurobiological perspective broadens the traditional view of developmental psychology, but does not replace it. Neurobiological processes neither fully explain human behaviour nor do they negate individual responsibility. However, they can help us understand why certain conflict dynamics persist despite considerable strain on all those involved, why reconciliation processes are often more difficult than expected, and why interventions may become less effective as the conflict becomes increasingly chronic. Of particular significance here is the possibility that certain mechanisms of chronic threat processing are not observed exclusively in children, but could also come into play at the parental level in a less pronounced or modified form. This assumption has so far only been partially investigated empirically, but can be theoretically justified on the basis of findings relating to attachment, stress and neurobiology.

Of particular interest in this context is the analogy with other forms of chronic stress. This study expressly does not take the view that family conflicts are equivalent to experiences of war or severe trauma. Nevertheless, various findings suggest that certain neural circuits involved in threat processing may respond to chronic family insecurity in a similar way to other forms of long-term social threat. The analogy therefore does not concern the nature of the event, but rather the direction of certain adaptive processes within biological stress and regulatory systems. It is precisely this distinction that allows us to take the effects of chronic high levels of conflict seriously, without dramatising them or equating them with fundamentally different forms of stress.

From this perspective, there are far-reaching implications for the evaluation of interventions. If chronic conflicts alter perception, emotional regulation and the experience of relationships in the long term, the question arises as to under what conditions mediation, counselling, therapy or family court measures can be effective at all. It is possible that some interventions fail not primarily due to a lack of motivation on the part of those involved, but because they encounter stress and threat systems that have already become chronic. This simultaneously implies a shift in focus from retrospective conflict management towards prevention. The earlier chronic escalation processes can be curbed, the greater the likelihood of preventing long-term neurobiological, psychological and relational entrenchment.

Against this background, this study pursues three objectives. *Firstly*, it aims to outline the neurobiological and attachment-theoretical foundations of chronic high-conflict situations. *Secondly*, it aims to investigate the extent to which the adaptive processes observed in children can provide insights into comparable dynamics among parents. *Thirdly*, the resulting implications for mediation, intervention, prevention, as well as for family court and family support systems, will be discussed. *The central thesis* is that high levels of conflict can be understood less as a static state of conflict and more as a chronic, attachment-related stress process, the dynamics of which can only be adequately understood by considering psychological, neurobiological and systemic perspectives together.

4. Attachment as a biological safety and regulatory system

The significance of chronic parental conflict can only be properly understood by first considering the function of human attachment. High levels of conflict do not affect children so profoundly simply because they witness disagreements between adults. Rather, their particular impact stems from the fact that the conflicts take place within those relationships that are of central importance for security, orientation and emotional regulation. From an attachment theory perspective, these are therefore not primarily communication problems, but potential threats to biologically rooted security systems.

Attachment theory traces its origins to the work of John Bowlby, who described attachment as an evolutionarily developed behavioural system whose central function lies in the protection of the individual (Bowlby, 1988). The human child is dependent on the care of others for many years. From this, a biological system developed that seeks and maintains closeness to protective attachment figures. Security arises not solely from the physical presence of the attachment figure, but from the expectation of protection, availability and emotional responsiveness (see Guerra, 2025).

The empirical work of Ainsworth et al. (1978) confirmed these assumptions and showed that children develop different attachment styles, which are linked to their experience of reliability and security in relationships. Secure attachment promotes exploration, learning and emotional self-regulation. Insecure attachment, by contrast, is more frequently associated with anxiety, heightened vigilance and difficulties in regulating emotions.

Modern attachment research no longer views attachment exclusively as a psychological concept, but increasingly as a biological regulatory system. Mikulincer & Shaver (2016)

describe attachment as a security and stress regulation system that remains effective throughout life. Attachment relationships help people to cope with stress, maintain emotional stability and assess threats. The capacity for self-regulation does not develop in isolation, but initially through close interaction with other people.

This view is supported by neurobiological research. Coan, Schaefer and Davidson (2006) were able to demonstrate that the presence of a familiar attachment figure reduces the neural response to threat (see Guerra, 2025). Social closeness therefore not only has a subjectively calming effect, but also measurably alters the processing of potential threats. The authors derived from this the so-called Social Baseline Theory, according to which social relationships constitute a fundamental component of human stress regulation.

Research into social pain also points in the same direction. Eisenberger (2012) argues that social rejection and the loss of relationships are not only psychologically distressing, but also activate, to some extent, the same systems at the neural level as physical pain. The organism therefore does not treat the threat to social relationships as a trivial event, but as a biologically significant threat.

This insight is of particular significance for children. Parents are not merely important attachment figures, but the central providers of security. They fulfil essential functions of co-regulation by contextualising stress, offering protection and helping to regulate emotional states. The development of independent regulatory abilities occurs only gradually and builds upon these early relational experiences.

Against this background, it becomes clear why chronic parental conflicts are a particularly stressful experience. Children do not merely witness two adults arguing. Rather, their core systems of security and orientation come under pressure. The very people from whom they expect protection and stability simultaneously appear as a source of insecurity, fear or threat. This creates a situation which, in terms of attachment theory, can be understood as a fundamental challenge to emotional security (Guerra, 2023).

The Emotional Security Theory developed by Davies & Cummings (1994), and later refined by Davies & Martin (2013), provides an important explanatory framework for this. According to this model, children react to chronic interparental conflicts with distress primarily because their emotional security is threatened. They develop strategies to detect conflicts at an early stage, assess risks and protect their own security within the family system. Under these conditions, heightened vigilance, conflicts of loyalty and a strong focus on conflict-related

signals do not appear to be expressions of a lack of adjustment, but rather understandable protective reactions.

The enduring nature of such experiences is particularly significant in this context. Individual conflicts are part and parcel of every family and do not, in themselves, pose a developmental risk. Conflict becomes problematic, in particular, when it appears chronic, intense and emotionally intractable. Children cannot withdraw from the attachment systems involved. They remain dependent on precisely those individuals who can simultaneously be a source of both security and insecurity. This gives rise to loyalty conflicts, adaptation strategies and forms of emotional self-organisation that can influence their further development in the long term.

Attachment theory thus provides a crucial starting point for understanding highly conflictual family systems. It makes it clear that chronic parental conflicts are not merely social events, but represent potential threats to biologically embedded security systems. It is precisely at this interface between attachment, security and stress that the neurobiological perspective begins. When attachment threats are repeatedly experienced, the question arises as to what effects this has on stress regulation and the long-term organisation of psychological processes. This relationship forms the subject of the following chapter.

5. From attachment threat to chronic stress activation

If attachment constitutes a biological safety and regulatory system, the question immediately arises as to what consequences a persistent threat to this system entails. Attachment theory describes why chronic parental conflicts are psychologically stressful. Stress research, on the other hand, provides explanations for how such stresses can become biologically organised in the long term. The integration of both perspectives is of central importance for understanding highly conflictual family systems.

From an evolutionary biological perspective, stress is not, in itself, a pathological condition. Stress responses serve to protect the organism from threats. Perceived dangers activate complex neuroendocrine systems that enable attention, alertness, the mobilisation of physical resources and behavioural adaptation. In the short term, such reactions increase the likelihood of survival. Stress becomes problematic above all when threats are not temporary but become chronic, and the corresponding regulatory systems remain permanently activated (McEwen, 2007).

At the centre of these processes lies the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis). If a situation is assessed as threatening, the hypothalamus activates hormonal signalling pathways that ultimately lead to the release of glucocorticoids, particularly cortisol. At the same time, sympathetic activation processes are triggered, increasing heart rate, alertness and physiological readiness for action. These reactions are highly adaptive in the face of acute danger. They enable rapid action, heightened vigilance and a focus on relevant environmental stimuli.

Chronic family conflicts, however, differ from short-term stressors. Children often do not experience highly contentious conflict systems as a one-off threat, but as recurring or persistent uncertainty. The stress often stems less from individual escalations than from their predictability and persistence. Repeated conflicts, pressure to choose sides, emotional unpredictability and the fear of losing relationships mean that stress systems are no longer activated only in specific situations, but may remain in a state of heightened alertness on a permanent basis.

McEwen (2007) describes this process using the concept of 'allostatic load'. Allostasis refers to the ability of biological systems to adapt to changing environmental conditions. However, if adaptive mechanisms remain activated over long periods, physiological strain arises. It is not the individual stress response that becomes the problem, but its chronic nature. This can lead to long-term changes in neuroendocrine, immunological and neuronal regulatory processes.

This dynamic is of particular significance for children. Developmental processes do not take place independently of environmental conditions, but in constant interaction with them. Shonkoff et al. (2012) therefore distinguish between positive, tolerable and toxic stress. Whilst short-term stress can be regulated by supportive caregivers, toxic stress arises in particular when severe or repeated stress occurs without sufficient social support. Chronic family conflicts can create precisely such conditions.

Attachment once again takes on central importance here. Secure attachment relationships normally act as a protective factor against stress. Parents help children to regulate stress, make sense of threats and restore emotional security. High levels of conflict fundamentally alter this dynamic. The very people who would normally facilitate co-regulation simultaneously become part of the stressful situation. As a result, the child effectively loses precisely the resource that would be necessary to cope with the stress.

Research suggests that chronic stress particularly affects those brain regions that are important for emotional regulation, threat processing and executive control. Arnsten (2009) describes how persistent stress can impair the functioning of prefrontal networks. These regions are involved, amongst other things, in impulse control, perspective-taking, working memory and flexible behavioural control. At the same time, evolutionarily older threat and alarm networks gain greater influence.

This gives rise to an important theoretical implication. Chronic stress does not merely mean ‘more strain’, but potentially a shift in the priorities of mental processing. Attention is increasingly directed towards danger detection. Ambivalent situations are interpreted as threatening more quickly. Short-term safety takes precedence over long-term integration. The individual increasingly organises themselves around protective and alarm mechanisms.

Lupien et al. (2009) point out that the duration of stress, in particular, is significant for long-term neurobiological consequences. Repeated activation of stress systems may be associated with changes in brain regions involved in learning, memory, emotional regulation and the processing of social information. However, these changes should not be understood as linear ‘damage’. Rather, they represent adaptive processes in response to environmental conditions that are experienced as persistently uncertain.

This point is particularly relevant to highly conflicted family systems. Children do not develop their perceptual and regulatory strategies in a vacuum, but within specific relational contexts. When conflict, uncertainty and pressure to choose sides become recurring experiences, it seems plausible that attention and behaviour will increasingly be oriented towards these conditions. Development then becomes partly organised around coping with threats.

Emotional Security Theory provides an important psychological mediating mechanism in this regard. According to Davies and Martin (2013), children not only react to chronic interparental conflict with emotional distress, but also develop social defence strategies. They observe conflicts closely, attempt to identify risks at an early stage, and adapt their behaviour in response to perceived dangers. From a neurobiological perspective, such strategies could be an expression of long-term sensitisation of threat-processing systems.

This perspective also alters the interpretation of many behaviours. Increased vigilance, withdrawal, emotional over-control, loyalty-oriented behaviour or aggressive reactions then appear not primarily as misbehaviour, but as adaptations to an environment that is

experienced as persistently unsafe. This makes the boundary between adaptation and distress more complex. Strategies that offer protection in the short term may limit developmental opportunities in the long term.

Finally, the issue of chronicity is of particular importance. Not every family-related stressor leads to long-term consequences. Many children successfully cope with separation situations, particularly when conflicts remain limited and stable attachment relationships can be maintained (Guerra, 2023). However, research increasingly suggests that prolonged, highly escalated conflicts represent a qualitatively different type of stress. These give rise not only to temporary stress reactions, but also to potentially lasting changes in the way safety, danger and social relationships are processed.

It is precisely at this point that neurobiological research into children in highly conflictual family systems becomes particularly relevant. For the first time, it enables the long-term consequences of chronic family stress to be examined not only psychologically but also at the level of neural development. The findings available to date provide remarkable insights into this and form the starting point for the following chapter.

6. Neurobiological evidence in children experiencing chronic parental conflict

The theoretical link between attachment threat and chronic stress activation suggests that prolonged family conflicts may have not only psychological but also neurobiological effects. For a long time, this assumption was based primarily on clinical observations and developmental psychological models. In recent years, however, a growing number of neurobiological studies have begun to empirically investigate the links between family stressors, brain development and psychological adjustment. Of particular significance here are large-scale longitudinal studies, which make it possible to correlate family environmental conditions with neurobiological and psychological developmental trajectories.

The most consistent findings to date suggest that chronic family conflicts do not affect individual symptoms in isolation, but are associated with changes in those neural networks that are important for emotion regulation, threat processing, social cognition and behavioural control. It should be emphasised that the research does not describe simple cause-and-effect relationships in the sense of direct ‘damage’. Rather, the data suggest that the child’s brain adapts to recurring environmental conditions. The crucial question is therefore not whether

conflicts ‘damage’ the brain, but which developmental priorities are promoted under conditions of chronic insecurity.

An important contribution to this question is provided by the ABCD study¹, which is currently the world’s largest long-term study of children’s neurocognitive development. Within this cohort, Gong et al. (2021) analysed the relationship between family environmental conditions, behavioural problems and brain structure. The authors found evidence that stressful family environments were associated with changes in brain regions involved in emotion regulation, social information processing and behavioural control. At the same time, children from conflict-ridden families were more likely to display depressive, aggressive and oppositional symptoms.

Of particular interest is the finding that the observed changes were not limited to a single brain region. Rather, they affected networks that integrate social and emotional information. This is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of attachment and stress research. Chronic family conflicts do not represent isolated stressors, but rather complex social experiences that simultaneously affect perception, emotion, attention and the experience of relationships. Accordingly, it seems plausible that their effects are not limited to isolated neural changes, but affect entire functional systems.

Harold & Sellers (2018) reach a similar conclusion in their comprehensive review. The authors describe chronic interparental conflict as one of the best-documented risk factors for the development of psychological distress in children and adolescents. Elevated levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, behavioural problems, aggression and difficulties with social adjustment are particularly common. Crucially, these effects cannot be explained by the separation itself alone. Rather, it appears that the ongoing conflict dynamics represent the key stressor.

Emotional Security Theory provides an important theoretical framework for this. According to Davies & Martin (2013), children are particularly sensitive to chronic conflict because their emotional security is threatened. The ongoing activation of insecurity leads to attention and behaviour becoming increasingly focused on conflict detection and self-protection. Children observe emotional cues more intently, attempt to identify risks at an early stage and develop strategies to avoid further distress. Whilst such adaptations may be functional in the short

¹ ABCD (Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development). S. Karcher & Barch, 2021.

term, in the long term they can impair developmental tasks such as exploration, learning or social openness.

From a neurobiological perspective, there is strong evidence to suggest that chronic family conflicts particularly influence the balance between threat processing and emotion regulation. McCrory & Viding (2015) describe this relationship within the framework of their theory of 'latent vulnerability'. According to this model, stressful childhood experiences do not necessarily lead directly to mental health disorders. Rather, they can trigger changes in stress and threat processing systems which fulfil adaptive functions in the short term but, in the long term, increase vulnerability to subsequent stressors. Children learn, as it were, to adapt to an environment that is experienced as unsafe.

This perspective is particularly significant for interpreting highly contentious family systems. Many behaviours observed in family court or psychological contexts appear in a different light when viewed from this angle. Excessive loyalty towards one parent, strong aversion to conflict-related situations, emotional over-control, withdrawal or increased irritability can, at least in part, be understood as adaptive strategies that serve to maintain a sense of subjective security. This blurs the line between a protective response and stress.

Research into the long-term consequences of early-life stress also supports this view. In their review, Teicher and Samson (2016) conclude that chronic childhood stress may be associated with lasting changes in neurobiological stress and regulatory systems. Networks involved in emotion regulation, threat processing and social learning are particularly affected. However, the authors expressly emphasise that these changes should not be understood as irreversible damage. Rather, they reflect the organism's ability to adapt to recurring environmental conditions.

It is precisely this interpretation that is of central importance to the present study. The neurobiological evidence suggests that children in highly conflictual family systems organise their development, in part, around coping with chronic uncertainty. This does not mean that conflicts inevitably lead to mental health disorders or that affected children remain permanently impaired. It does, however, mean that developmental resources must be increasingly channelled towards processing threats, loyalty conflicts and emotional uncertainty. As a result, attention, learning processes and social exploration are potentially in competition with safety and protective mechanisms.

The findings of research to date thus contradict the widespread assumption that children become accustomed to chronic conflicts or that their effects fade over time. Rather, development itself appears to respond to the demands of a conflict-ridden environment. Conflict is not merely experienced, but becomes an organising principle of psychological adaptation. It is precisely here that the true significance of the neurobiological findings lies. They not only show that chronic family conflicts are stressful, but also provide clues as to why these stresses can be so effective in the long term.

At the same time, this insight raises a further question. If chronic family conflicts trigger similar stress and adaptation processes to other forms of long-term threat, the question arises as to whether analogies with trauma-related models are scientifically justifiable. This question is particularly relevant because it is often misunderstood. It is not a matter of equating parental conflicts with experiences of war or severe trauma. Rather, the question is whether certain neural systems can respond to different forms of chronic threat in a comparable manner. The examination of this analogy forms the subject of the following chapter.

7. The analogy with chronic trauma exposure: possibilities and limitations

The findings presented so far suggest that chronic parental conflict can extend far beyond the immediate psychological distress. It affects attachment systems, triggers stress responses and is associated with changes in the neurobiological networks that are important for emotional regulation, threat processing and social orientation. Against this background, the question inevitably arises as to whether, and to what extent, analogies with other forms of chronic stress are scientifically tenable.

Particular precision is required precisely at this point. In public and specialist discussions, highly contentious parental conflicts are occasionally compared to experiences of war or severe trauma. Such equivalences are not scientifically tenable. The objective intensity of stress associated with military combat experiences, organised violence or severe trauma differs fundamentally from that of family conflicts. A direct equivalence would fail to recognise both the specific characteristics of traumatic experiences and the complexity of familial attachment processes.

This study therefore expressly does not draw any analogy between events. The question is not whether parental conflicts are the same as experiences of war. Rather, the scientifically

relevant question is whether certain neural systems can respond in a comparable manner to different forms of chronic threat. The analogy therefore does not concern the triggering event, but rather certain mechanisms of threat processing and adaptation.

This distinction is in line with the current state of stress and trauma research. Neurobiological models increasingly assume that different stressors can, in some cases, activate common biological response pathways. What is decisive here is not so much the objective nature of the stressor as its subjective significance for safety, control and predictability. Threats that are experienced as chronic, uncontrollable and existentially significant have a particular potential to activate stress systems over the long term (McEwen, 2007; Lupien et al., 2009).

For children, chronic parental conflict exhibits precisely these characteristics. The stress does not stem solely from individual arguments, but from the persistent uncertainty surrounding key attachment relationships. The child can neither control nor escape the situation. At the same time, the threat affects those individuals on whom their safety directly depends. From an attachment theory perspective, this therefore constitutes a form of chronic social threat with high subjective relevance.

McCrory et al. (2011) were able to demonstrate that children exposed to domestic violence exhibit increased neural reactivity to threatening stimuli. Brain regions involved in the rapid detection of potential dangers were particularly affected. The authors interpreted these changes not as deficits, but as adaptations to stressful environmental conditions. A child living in a potentially dangerous environment benefits in the short term from increased sensitivity to warning signals. In the long term, however, the same adaptation may be associated with increased psychological vulnerability.

Similar considerations can be found in the theory of latent vulnerability proposed by McCrory & Viding (2015). The authors argue that early adversity can trigger changes in stress and threat processing systems which are adaptive in the short term but increase susceptibility to mental health problems in the long term. These adaptations particularly affect the perception of potential dangers, the assessment of social situations and the regulation of emotional responses.

This perspective appears particularly relevant to highly conflicted family systems. Children in situations of chronic conflict often develop a keen sensitivity to emotional cues. They closely observe their parents' moods, detect tensions at an early stage and attempt to anticipate potential escalations. Such behaviours are often described in everyday life as over-adaptation,

hypervigilance or emotional over-control. From a neurobiological perspective, however, they can be understood as an expression of long-term adaptation to an environment in which threat signals are highly significant.

Emotional Security Theory once again provides an important psychological mediating mechanism in this regard. Davies & Martin (2013) describe how children exposed to chronic interparental conflict develop social defence strategies. The aim of these strategies is to maintain emotional security. From a neurobiological perspective, they functionally correspond to what is described in other stressful contexts as heightened threat orientation. The child increasingly focuses their attention, behaviour and emotional regulation on recognising and avoiding potential dangers.

Research into the long-term consequences of abuse and neglect also provides evidence of comparable processes. Teicher & Samson (2016) consistently report links between early adversity and changes in networks governing emotional regulation, threat processing and social cognition. Although highly contentious parental conflicts must not be equated with abuse, these findings illustrate that chronic social stress fundamentally has the potential to trigger long-term adaptations in biological regulatory systems.

The scientific significance of the analogy therefore lies not in claiming that the stresses are identical, but in recognising similar functional principles. Threat processing systems do not necessarily distinguish between legal, social or physical stresses. What is decisive, rather, is whether a situation is experienced as relevant to safety, control and survival. Under certain conditions, chronic family insecurity can take on precisely this quality.

This idea is significant for the present study because it builds a bridge to the parental level. If chronic attachment threat and long-term stress activation can trigger adaptation processes in children, the question arises as to whether comparable mechanisms also come into play in adults. The empirical evidence in this area is considerably more limited. Nevertheless, the theoretical consideration appears plausible, as adults also possess biologically embedded attachment and security systems. The investigation of this possible transferability forms the starting point of the following chapter.

8. Extension to the parental level: an attachment- and stress-based hypothesis

The findings presented so far relate predominantly to children. A considerable body of empirical evidence now exists for children, showing that chronic family conflicts can impair attachment security, activate stress systems and promote long-term adaptations in emotional and neurobiological regulatory processes. The question of whether comparable mechanisms can also be observed, at least in part, at the parental level is considerably more difficult to answer. The state of research in this area is significantly less developed. Nevertheless, the question appears to be significant both theoretically and practically, as highly contentious conflicts, by definition, affect not only children but also the parents involved over long periods of time.

Firstly, it should be noted that adults and children cannot be treated as equivalent. Adults possess significantly more developed capacities for self-regulation, perspective-taking and cognitive control. They have legal means of action, social resources and life experiences that are not available to children. A direct transfer of findings from children to adults would therefore not be scientifically tenable. Nevertheless, this observation does not imply that adults are immune to threats to attachment or chronic stress. On the contrary: modern attachment research explicitly assumes that attachment systems remain active throughout life and continue to fulfil central functions of emotional security even in adulthood (Guerra, 2025; 2023; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Partnerships are among the most important attachment relationships in adult life. They not only fulfil social or emotional needs, but also perform essential functions relating to stress regulation, identity stabilisation and social security. From an attachment theory perspective, a break-up therefore represents not merely the end of a relationship, but often also the loss of a central regulatory system. This is particularly true when the break-up is unexpected, is experienced as rejection, or is associated with protracted conflicts.

Research into attachment in adulthood describes various patterns of response to threats to attachment relationships. Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) distinguish in particular between hyperactivation and deactivation strategies. Hyperactivation is characterised by intense preoccupation with the threatened relationship, heightened sensitivity to rejection, strong emotional reactions and difficulties in creating emotional distance. Deactivation strategies, by contrast, are more commonly manifested in emotional withdrawal, avoidance and attempts to

suppress attachment needs. Both strategies can be understood as attempts to cope with perceived attachment insecurity (Derenthall et al. 2026; Vormelker, 2026).

Highly contentious separation disputes, in particular, contain numerous elements that make the long-term activation of such mechanisms seem plausible. Repeated legal disputes, arguments over children, accusations, conflicts of loyalty, financial uncertainty and ongoing confrontation with the former partner create conditions under which a threat to the bond is not experienced as a one-off event, but can persist for years. Unlike in many other separation situations, the relationship does not end completely. It merely changes form. Joint parenting often forces those involved into continued interactions, even if these are experienced as stressful or threatening.

From the perspective of stress psychology, it is significant that chronic conflicts can alter the conditions necessary for rational conflict management. Arnsten (2009) describes how persistent stress can, in particular, impair functions associated with cognitive flexibility, impulse control and perspective-taking. However, these abilities are of central importance precisely for mediation, cooperation and constructive conflict resolution. This gives rise to a theoretically significant possibility: high levels of conflict may not only be an expression of a lack of cooperation, but may simultaneously create conditions that make cooperation increasingly difficult.

A similar line of reasoning can be found in mentalisation theory. Fonagy and Luyten (2009) describe mentalisation as the ability to understand one's own and others' behaviour in the light of internal states. This ability is of central importance for the regulation of social relationships. However, under conditions of high emotional arousal, it may be temporarily impaired. People then tend to interpret behaviour as deliberately hostile more frequently, react more strongly to perceived slights and become less tolerant of ambivalence. Highly escalated parental conflicts, in particular, exhibit numerous characteristics that could facilitate such processes.

Nevertheless, the transfer of insights gained in childhood to adults remains a hypothesis. Current research does not yet allow us to conclude whether chronic high levels of conflict between parents lead to the same neurobiological changes as in children. The available evidence is insufficient for this. However, it seems scientifically reasonable to assume that similar attachment and stress systems could be affected (Guerra, 2025). If the same biological

mechanisms of security, threat processing and social regulation are involved, it seems plausible that, at least in part, comparable adaptive processes occur.

This perspective has significant practical implications. High levels of conflict would then not be understood exclusively as a consequence of individual characteristics, a lack of willingness to cooperate, or strategic behaviour. Rather, it could, at least in part, be the result of a self-reinforcing process in which threats to attachment, stress activation and conflict dynamics mutually reinforce one another. The longer such a process persists, the more difficult it may become to return to earlier forms of cooperative interaction.

At the same time, such a perspective must not be misunderstood. The assumption of neurobiological or attachment-related influences does not negate personal responsibility. Parents remain fundamentally capable of acting and responsible for their behaviour. The present argument therefore aims not at excusing, but at explaining. It broadens the interpretative framework within which highly contentious conflicts can be understood. Responsibility and neurobiological influences are not mutually exclusive. Rather, taking biological and psychological processes into account can help to develop more realistic expectations regarding interventions and conflict management.

It is precisely here that the particular significance of the present hypothesis lies. If chronic high-conflict situations do indeed alter the conditions under which people perceive and process conflicts, then the question inevitably arises as to the limits of traditional intervention approaches. This becomes particularly relevant for mediation and reconciliation processes. Both require skills that may be impaired under chronic stress and persistent threats to attachment. The examination of these interrelationships forms the subject of the following chapter.

9. Why reconciliation and mediation become more difficult as conflict becomes increasingly chronic

If chronic high-conflict situations are understood not merely as a communication problem but as a relationship- and stress-related escalation process, the question inevitably arises as to the possibilities and limitations of traditional forms of intervention. Mediation is particularly relevant in this context. Hardly any other process embodies the hope of achieving sustainable conflict resolution through communication, perspective-taking and the joint development of solutions. At the same time, both practical experience and academic research (McIntosh &

Tan, 2017; McIntosh et al., 2008) show that the effectiveness of mediation can decline significantly as conflict intensity and chronicity increase. The neurobiological and attachment theory perspectives offer a possible explanation for this.

Fundamentally, mediation is based on several psychological prerequisites. The parties involved must be able, at least to a limited extent, to understand the other party's perspective, tolerate ambivalence, regulate their own emotions and even consider the possibility of constructive solutions. Mediation does not, therefore, require the parties to like or trust one another. It does, however, require that they still perceive the conflict as negotiable.

It is precisely these prerequisites that can become increasingly compromised in situations of chronic, high-conflict disputes. From the perspective of attachment theory, this means that the parties to the conflict no longer react exclusively at the factual level, but rather to threats to central systems of security and attachment. The conflict then no longer concerns merely issues of care, the right to determine the child's place of residence or financial arrangements. It becomes a dispute over control, loss, recognition, loyalty, identity and security. The longer such a process continues, the more the perception of the conflict can change.

Mentalisation theory provides an important explanatory framework for this. Fonagy & Luyten (2009) describe how the capacity for mentalisation can be impaired, particularly under conditions of high emotional arousal. Mentalisation enables us to understand our own and others' behaviour as an expression of inner states. It allows us to recognise that people may have different perceptions, feelings and motives without these necessarily being hostile. Under stress and when feeling threatened, however, this ability often diminishes. The other person's behaviour is then increasingly interpreted in a one-dimensional way. Ambivalence is lost. The likelihood of perceiving neutral or ambiguous actions as deliberate attacks increases.

Highly contentious parental conflicts, in particular, exhibit numerous characteristics that can foster such processes. Repeated disappointments, legal disputes, recriminations, conflicts of loyalty and a sense of ongoing threat reinforce the tendency to view the other party primarily through the lens of potential danger. From this perspective, it becomes clear why even well-intentioned attempts at mediation can often fail. The difficulty does not necessarily lie in a lack of desire for peace, but possibly in the altered psychological conditions under which conflicts are processed.

From the perspective of attachment theory, reconciliation involves a further key prerequisite: the restoration of security. Reconciliation presupposes that past hurts no longer dominate the

entire experience of the relationship . This does not mean that past events must be forgotten. It does, however, mean that new experiences are given sufficient weight to partially put previous perceptions of threat into perspective. It is precisely this process that is hampered by chronic stress activation. People then focus more on potential risks than on new opportunities. Trust becomes more difficult because mistrust appears, in the short term, to be a safer strategy.

This may be a key difference between early and late interventions. In the early stages of a conflict, perceptions of threat are often less entrenched. Those involved are more likely to be able to adopt different perspectives and consider alternative interpretations. Under such conditions, mediation can help to prevent escalations and promote cooperative solutions. However, as the conflict becomes more chronic, the situation changes. Conflicts are not merely experienced but increasingly become part of personal and relational identity. The parties involved sometimes define themselves through the conflict itself. As a result, any change simultaneously challenges existing self-perceptions and perceptions of others.

Research into highly conflicted families going through separation confirms this observation. Kelly & Emery (2003) point out that protracted interparental conflicts are among the most significant predictors of negative developmental trajectories and that reducing them is a key prerequisite for improving children's outcomes. At the same time, studies show that the effectiveness of traditional conflict-resolution-oriented interventions can be significantly limited in families experiencing chronic, high-conflict situations. Whilst mediation and cooperative procedures frequently achieve positive effects in moderately conflict-ridden separations, they often reach their limits in the case of long-standing, highly escalated conflicts, because the willingness to communicate and cooperate required for such interventions is only available to a limited extent (Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2004; Emery et al., 2005). In such cases, increasingly structured and coordinated forms of intervention are recommended.

Of particular interest in this context are studies on so-called child-inclusive mediation. These approaches are based on the assumption that the structured inclusion of children's perspectives can promote parents' capacity for reflection and put conflict-centred narratives into perspective. Empirical studies show that, following child-inclusive mediation, parents not only report a more lasting reduction in conflict but also reach more stable agreements and are less likely to initiate further family court proceedings than parents in comparable, exclusively parent-centred mediation processes (McIntosh et al., 2008). From the perspective of developmental and attachment psychology, this seems plausible because parents' attention is

temporarily shifted from their mutual recriminations to the child's subjective experiences and needs, which can foster more cooperative forms of parental decision-making (McIntosh, 2024). The limitations of this approach must also be highlighted (Guerra, 2026b).

At the same time, the potential of such interventions should be assessed realistically. If chronic high levels of conflict are indeed linked to long-term changes in perception, threat processing and the experience of relationships, it seems unlikely that individual conversations or short-term measures can rapidly alter deeply entrenched dynamics. Under these conditions, the notion of rapid reconciliation becomes problematic. Not because peace would be impossible, but because the underlying processes take time.

This gives rise to an important practical implication. In highly chronic cases, the primary aim of interventions might not be to restore close cooperation, but initially to reduce further escalation. From a systemic perspective, this corresponds to the transition from reconciliation to containment. The immediate aim is not to bring the parents closer together emotionally, but to limit harmful patterns of interaction and restore sufficient stability for the child. Only on this basis can more far-reaching changes become possible at all.

The neurobiological perspective does not, therefore, lead to a pessimistic view of mediation or reconciliation. However, it does alter expectations regarding their temporal dynamics. Peace no longer appears to be the result of a single moment of realisation, but rather a process of gradually restoring security, trust and mental flexibility. The earlier this process begins, the greater the prospects of success are likely to be. The more chronic conflicts become, the more important realistic goals, long-term perspectives and the limitation of further stress become.

It is precisely this consideration that highlights the particular importance of prevention. If chronicity increasingly undermines the conditions for successful conflict management, then the most effective intervention may not lie in repairing highly escalated systems, but in preventing their emergence at an early stage. The following chapter is devoted to this idea.

10. Prevention as a key intervention strategy

The considerations set out so far lead to a conclusion that is as significant as it is challenging for family court practice: if chronic high-conflict situations are understood as an attachment-related stress process, the consequences of which can become entrenched as they persist, then the focus of effective interventions inevitably shifts from repair to prevention.

The crucial question is then no longer solely how highly escalated conflicts can be resolved, but how to prevent conflicts from reaching that stage of chronicity at all, at which they begin to have a lasting impact on perception, emotional regulation and the experience of relationships.

This perspective represents a significant paradigm shift. Traditionally, many family law and psychosocial interventions have focused on conflicts that are already manifest. Courts, counselling centres, experts and other support services often only become involved once the escalation is already well advanced. By this stage, however, not only have conflict patterns become entrenched, but so too have patterns of perception and interaction. The neurobiological and attachment theory perspective suggests that this may be precisely where a central problem lies (Guerra, 2025; 2023).

From the perspective of developmental psychology, the importance of early intervention has long been recognised. Harold & Sellers (2018) point out that the negative effects of interparental conflict depend largely on its duration and intensity. Children are particularly likely to exhibit adverse developmental trajectories when conflicts become chronic and sufficient emotional security can no longer be established. Similar conclusions arise from Emotional Security Theory. The focus is not on individual instances of conflict, but on the ongoing destabilisation of emotional security (Davies & Martin, 2013).

In this context, prevention does not mean the unrealistic notion of conflict-free families. Conflicts are an inherent part of human relationships and are neither avoidable nor inherently harmful. Rather, numerous studies show that children can benefit from conflicts that are dealt with constructively and resolved in a way they can understand, because in the process they learn to tolerate different perspectives, develop problem-solving strategies and experience the restorability of interpersonal relationships (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies et al., 2012). It is not the conflict itself that is problematic, but its destructive and chronic nature. Developmental risks arise in particular when conflicts remain unresolved, escalate or become a permanent organising principle of family relationships, thereby undermining the child's sense of emotional security (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Prevention therefore does not aim to avoid all disputes, but rather to prevent the processes through which conflicts become chronic and develop into stable patterns of family interaction.

The attachment theory perspective illustrates why early interventions are of particular importance. Attachment systems are sensitive to insecurity, yet at the same time they remain

fundamentally malleable. As long as conflicts have not yet dominated perception and relationship dynamics over long periods of time, there are greater chances of restoring security and stabilising cooperative patterns of interaction. As conflicts become increasingly chronic, however, protective and alarm mechanisms become more firmly entrenched. Those involved become increasingly focused on avoiding threats, which reduces their openness to alternative perspectives.

From a neurobiological perspective, this corresponds to the general logic of stress adaptations. Short-term activations of biological stress systems are reversible and often functional. Long-term activations, by contrast, lead to more stable adaptation processes that are more difficult to change (McEwen, 2007; Lupien et al., 2009). Applied to highly contentious parental conflicts, this means that early de-escalation is not merely a question of subjective well-being, but may represent the most effective form of neurobiological prevention.

It is precisely at this point that alternative conflict resolution models take on particular significance. Mediation, consensus-oriented procedures, coordinated parental counselling and other forms of early intervention can help to break spirals of escalation before they become permanently entrenched. The significance of such procedures may lie not only in their immediate conflict-resolution function, but also in their ability to prevent processes leading to chronic conflict. They thus potentially operate at an earlier stage than many subsequent family court measures.

In this context, the question of why some families do not develop highly conflictual dynamics despite facing considerable pressures seems particularly interesting. Research into resilience suggests that stable attachment relationships, social support, constructive conflict-resolution strategies and institutional support can act as important protective factors. Children do not need parents who are free from conflict, but parents who can provide sufficient security despite conflicts. It follows that prevention should not only aim to reduce conflict, but also to strengthen the conditions that enable emotional security.

This is where the importance of the family support system also becomes apparent. Family counselling, youth welfare services, mediation, legal representation, psychological support and court interventions are often seen as reactions to existing problems. From a preventative perspective, however, they could fulfil a different function. They could help to identify conflict dynamics at an early stage and limit escalations before chronic patterns become

established. The central question is then no longer simply how conflicts should be resolved, but how their long-term entrenchment can be prevented.

The work of Guerra González (2026; 2024; 2023) highlights a further significant aspect in this context. Family support systems are not merely neutral observers of family conflicts. They themselves become part of the conflict dynamics. Their structure, procedures and intervention strategies influence how conflicts are managed and perpetuated. This highlights the need to consider prevention not only at the level of families, but also at the level of institutions.

It is precisely here that the most important implication of the present argument may lie. If chronicity is the central risk factor, then prevention must begin earlier than many existing interventions. The most effective measure against highly contentious trajectories might be to alter the conditions under which they arise. This applies to families as well as to the systems that support them. The question of the role of family court and family support institutions thus becomes a key academic and practical challenge.

The next chapter therefore examines the extent to which existing family court and family support systems may unintentionally contribute to the chronic nature of conflicts, and what consequences this has for the further development of these systems with a focus on the best interests of the child.

11. The role of family court and family support systems: between conflict resolution and conflict intensification

The argument put forward so far leads to a question of considerable significance, both academically and socially: if chronic, high-conflict situations can have long-term consequences relating to attachment and neurobiology, do the institutions entrusted with managing such conflicts play a role in this? This question is not directed against family court or family support systems. Rather, it stems from the realisation that interventions are never separate from the dynamics of conflict. They become part of the very social processes that they are intended to influence.

Traditionally, family courts, child welfare services, counselling centres, legal representatives, experts and other stakeholders are understood as instruments of conflict resolution. Their role is to ensure protection, make decisions, structure conflicts and safeguard the best interests of the child. These objectives are, in principle, sensible and necessary. Nevertheless, the question

arises as to whether systems originally developed to deal with legal conflicts are also suitable for influencing the psychological and neurobiological dynamics of chronic high-conflict situations (Guerra, 2026).

This question takes on greater significance when one considers that the historical development of family court proceedings has been shaped primarily by the principles of the rule of law. Courts are designed to examine claims, clarify the facts, protect rights and make decisions. The logic of court proceedings is necessarily adversarial. Different positions are set against one another, assessed and ultimately decided upon. This approach is indispensable for establishing legal certainty. However, it differs fundamentally from the conditions under which emotional security, trust or reconciliation arise (Guerra, 2026a).

This may represent a structural tension. A system designed to deliver justice is increasingly being entrusted with the task of safeguarding children's welfare and positively influencing family development processes (2026a). Whilst these two objectives overlap, they are not identical. Whilst court proceedings are geared towards clarification and decision-making, attachment-related and developmental psychological processes often require stability, predictability, cooperation and time.

From a systemic perspective, it therefore seems legitimate to ask whether family court proceedings may, under certain conditions, inadvertently contribute to the chronic nature of conflicts. This does not mean that courts cause conflicts. Parental conflicts – albeit highly contentious ones – generally arise before the legal dispute begins. Nevertheless, institutional frameworks can influence how conflicts are carried forward. Every application, every submission, every taking of evidence and every court decision becomes part of the conflict system and alters its dynamics (Guerra, 2026a).

Conflict research has long assumed that escalation processes are largely characterised by reciprocal feedback mechanisms. Actions by one party to a conflict trigger reactions from the other side, which in turn provoke further counter-reactions, thereby creating self-reinforcing spirals of escalation (Deutsch, 1973; Glasl, 2024; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). As escalation intensifies, the original issue often recedes into the background, whilst attention increasingly focuses on the conflict itself. Conflicts thus develop a momentum of their own and become detached from their original cause (Glasl, 2024). From a systemic perspective, they are increasingly sustained by their own reproduction, so that the conflict interactions themselves become the central focus of the relationship. This process has also been described in the

context of highly contentious family conflicts: protracted conflicts are often sustained less by the original issues at stake than by mutual perceptions of the other as an enemy, mistrust and ongoing patterns of interaction (Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2003).

From an attachment theory perspective, a similar process could be described. The more perception and behaviour are oriented towards perceived threats, the more likely interpretations become that suggest further threats. Distrust generates additional attempts at control. Attempts at control generate resistance. Resistance, in turn, confirms existing fears. Such dynamics can become entrenched over the course of years without the parties involved consciously seeking this outcome.

This is where the neurobiological perspective takes on particular relevance. If chronic conflicts are indeed linked to an increasing sensitisation of threat-processing systems, then institutional processes could unintentionally reinforce precisely those patterns of perception and reaction that they actually aim to reduce. Procedures that rely on the presentation of evidence, the attribution of blame or the highlighting of problematic behaviour inevitably lead to a focus on deficits and risks. Whilst this focus is often necessary from a legal perspective, psychologically it can serve to reinforce existing conflict narratives.

The analysis of family support systems carried out by Guerra González (2024) points to several mechanisms that, under certain conditions, can contribute to escalation. These include, in particular, lengthy proceedings, repeated assessments, unclear responsibilities, contradictory interventions and a lack of coordination between different actors (Thode et al. 2026). Each of these factors can prolong uncertainty and thus perpetuate precisely those conditions that appear problematic from an attachment- and stress-related perspective.

The time dimension is particularly significant. The neurobiological argument put forward in this essay suggests that chronicity is the decisive risk factor. It follows that not only the nature of an intervention is relevant, but also its timing. Proceedings that stretch over years can have a stressful effect even when the individual decisions made are appropriate. From the child's perspective, a protracted conflict often means continued exposure to uncertainty. From the parents' perspective, it means the constant maintenance of conflict-related arousal.

This leads to a further consideration. If prevention is indeed the most effective form of intervention, then family court and family support systems would need to be assessed more closely in terms of the extent to which they prevent or contribute to the chronic nature of disputes. Such a perspective would broaden the focus from merely deciding individual points

of contention to the long-term dynamics of the system as a whole. The question would then be not only whether a decision is legally correct, but also what impact it might have on the further development of the conflict system.

This is not about replacing procedures under the rule of law with psychological concepts. Rather, it is about complementing them. Legal decisions remain indispensable. However, they alone may not be sufficient to adequately address the complex developmental and relational processes within highly contentious families. The challenge lies in integrating legal, psychological and developmental perspectives more closely.

From this perspective, the best interests of the child no longer appear solely as the result of individual measures, but as an emergent property of an overall system. Family courts, youth welfare services, counselling, mediation, legal representation and expert assessments all act together on the same conflict. Their effects do not simply add up, but influence one another. A further development of these systems focused on the best interests of the child therefore requires not only better individual measures, but a deeper understanding of their interactions.

The central thesis of this chapter is therefore not that family court or family support systems cause high levels of conflict. Rather, it is argued that, under certain conditions, they may unintentionally contribute to its perpetuation (or, in some cases, its intensification). Precisely because these systems were created to protect children, it seems necessary to examine their effects from the perspectives of attachment, stress and neurobiology. Such a perspective opens up the possibility of understanding prevention not only as the responsibility of parents, but also as the responsibility of institutions.

This brings the present line of argument full circle. Chronic high levels of conflict no longer appear to be exclusively an individual or family problem. Rather, they arise from the interplay of biological, psychological, social and institutional processes. Taking these interactions into account could make an important contribution to improving the conditions under which children, parents and professional support systems deal with family conflicts.

12. Outlook: Implications for child welfare, research and practice

This study began with the question of whether neurobiology can make a relevant contribution to our understanding of chronic high-conflict situations. The findings presented suggest that, in principle, the answer to this question is yes. At the same time, it is evident that the

significance of neurobiological insights does not lie in the description of individual brain regions or stress hormones. Their true value lies in providing an expanded framework for understanding family conflict dynamics. Neurobiology does not alter the moral evaluation of behaviour, but it does change the way in which the conditions for behaviour are understood.

One of the most important implications concerns the concept of the child's best interests itself. In many family court proceedings, the child's best interests are assessed primarily on the basis of specific upbringing conditions, care arrangements or individual behaviours. These aspects undoubtedly remain significant. However, the present argument suggests that the long-term stability of emotional security should also be regarded as an independent factor in the best interests of the child. From the perspective of attachment theory, emotional security is not merely a supplement to other developmental conditions, but one of their central prerequisites.

Research into chronic parental conflict increasingly shows that children suffer not only from individual stressful events, but above all from the persistent activation of insecurity. The real danger often lies not in spectacular escalations of conflict, but in their repetition. From a developmental psychology perspective, it is therefore not the intensity of individual conflicts that appears to be decisive, but rather the question of whether children can live in a state of emotional predictability and security in the long term. The neurobiological perspective reinforces this view by highlighting that chronic insecurity does not merely cause subjective suffering, but can influence developmental processes themselves.

This also has implications for the assessment of parental behaviour. In highly contentious proceedings, there is often a tendency to view conflicts primarily from the perspective of individual responsibility. Responsibility undoubtedly remains a central aspect. This paper expressly does not advocate a 'biologisation' or 'determinism' of human behaviour. Neurobiological findings must not be misunderstood as either an excuse or a justification for problematic behaviour.

At the same time, it seems scientifically inadequate to interpret conflict dynamics exclusively in moral or volitional terms. Research suggests that chronic attachment threat, stress activation and emotional insecurity can alter the conditions under which people make decisions. This is particularly true when conflicts persist over long periods and become central components of the relationship experience. Recognising such connections does not negate responsibility. However, it broadens the explanatory framework and can help to avoid placing unrealistic expectations on the parties to a conflict.

These considerations are of particular importance for the design of professional interventions. If the theoretical assumptions of this work hold true, then interventions must take greater account of the fact that chronic conflicts cannot be resolved solely through additional communication or appeals to reason. Cooperation requires certain psychological prerequisites. Perspective-taking, mentalisation, tolerance of ambivalence and trust do not arise independently of emotional security. The more these foundations are compromised, the more difficult traditional conflict-resolution-oriented approaches become.

This does not mean that mediation, counselling or therapy are becoming less important. Rather, their theoretical significance is changing. Interventions are no longer seen primarily as tools for resolving existing conflicts, but as attempts to restore the conditions under which conflict resolution becomes possible in the first place. The focus shifts from reaching an immediate agreement to creating security, predictability and emotional relief. It is only on this basis that more far-reaching cooperative processes can emerge.

This line of argument also has significant implications for future research. Particularly striking is the discrepancy between the extensive evidence on children and the comparatively limited research on parents. Whilst the effects of chronic family stress on child development are increasingly being investigated, there are as yet only a few studies that systematically analyse comparable processes among highly conflicted parents. The assumption that attachment and stress mechanisms might also play a role at the parental level therefore remains, for the time being, hypothetical. It appears theoretically plausible but requires further empirical testing.

This opens up a promising field of research. Future studies could investigate how chronic separation conflicts are linked to stress regulation, mentalisation, emotional processing and decision-making behaviour. Equally relevant would be the question of which factors promote a return to cooperative patterns of interaction. Such findings could be of considerable value, particularly for the further development of mediation, parental counselling and family court interventions.

A further research perspective concerns the role of institutional systems. This study has put forward the hypothesis that family court and family support procedures do not merely react to conflicts, but can themselves become part of the conflict dynamics. This assumption has so far been insufficiently investigated. Future research should therefore analyse more closely

which institutional conditions promote escalation, which limit it, and how procedures can be designed to prevent chronic conflict at the earliest possible stage.

It is precisely here that the circle closes with regard to prevention. The neurobiological perspective suggests that the most effective interventions may well be those that do not even become visible, because they prevent chronicification processes. Successful prevention does not necessarily mean resolving all conflicts. Rather, it means preventing conflicts from becoming the dominant organising principle of family relationships. From this perspective, prevention appears not as a supplement to existing measures, but as their overarching goal.

The central importance of neurobiology therefore ultimately lies not in explaining individual symptoms, but in broadening our understanding of high-conflict situations. It makes it clear that chronic conflicts are not merely legal or communicative events, but processes that affect attachment, security, development and social relationships. This also changes the perspective on possible solutions. The focus shifts from the question of how conflicts can be resolved to the question of how security, development and the protection of relationships can be guaranteed whilst differences persist.

This work thus leads to a *conclusion* that is modest yet far-reaching: highly contentious situations may not be entirely preventable. Their chronic nature, however, could be influenced to a considerable extent. It is precisely here that the perhaps most important opportunity for research, practice and family policy lies. It is not the retrospective repair of conflict systems that have already become entrenched, but the early prevention of their escalation that appears to be the most promising way to protect children and families.

13. Concluding Remarks

This study began with a comparatively simple, yet far-reaching question: What role does neurobiology play in understanding chronic, highly contentious parental conflicts? An analysis of the available research suggests that this question cannot be answered either through biological determinism or a purely psychological approach. Rather, the evidence suggests that chronic high-conflict situations should be understood as a multidimensional process in which attachment, stress, development, social interaction and institutional frameworks are intricately interwoven.

The starting point was attachment theory. It makes it clear that family relationships represent far more to children than mere social contacts or legal arrangements. Parents form the central systems of security and regulation in a child's development. Chronic conflicts therefore not only threaten the family atmosphere, but also affect the biological foundations of emotional security. Research over the past decades has increasingly shown that this threat is not without consequences. Children respond to chronic insecurity with adaptive processes that affect psychological, social and neurobiological levels in equal measure.

Of particular significance here is the realisation that chronic parental conflict should not be understood primarily as the consequence of individual stressful events. The real danger lies rather in its persistence. Repeated activation of insecurity, loyalty conflicts and perceptions of threat can lead to attention, emotional regulation and social orientation becoming increasingly organised around coping with these stresses. This does not necessarily result in a pathological development, but it does shift the focus towards protective and safety strategies. Neurobiological research provides a plausible explanation for this by demonstrating that chronic stress can promote long-term adaptations in the systems responsible for threat processing, emotional regulation and social cognition.

It is precisely here that the analogy with other forms of chronic stress acquires its scientific significance. This study has deliberately refrained from equating parental conflict with experiences of war or severe trauma. Such an equation would be justifiable neither empirically nor ethically. Nevertheless, the assumption that different forms of chronic threat can, to some extent, activate similar biological response pathways appears plausible. The analogy therefore does not concern the events themselves, but rather the functioning of certain stress and regulatory systems. This distinction makes it possible to take the effects of chronic high levels of conflict seriously without dramatising them.

Of particular interest here was the question of whether the processes observed in children might provide indications of comparable dynamics in parents. Current research does not allow for any definitive conclusions on this point. Nevertheless, the theoretical extrapolation appears plausible. Adults, too, possess biologically embedded attachment systems. They, too, react to loss, rejection, uncertainty and threat with stress activation. The assumption that chronic high levels of conflict can, in the long term, influence the conditions for cooperation, perspective-taking and conflict resolution therefore constitutes a scientifically justifiable hypothesis. It replaces neither responsibility nor freedom of choice, but it does broaden the framework within which parental behaviour can be understood.

It is precisely at this point that the importance of mediation becomes apparent. This study has proposed that mediation should be viewed not merely as a communication process, but also as an intervention within a system related to attachment and stress. Mediation requires skills that may become increasingly limited under chronic stress: mentalisation, tolerance of ambivalence, affect regulation and trust. It does not follow from this that mediation would be ineffective in highly conflicted families. It does, however, follow that its prospects of success are likely to depend significantly on the timing, context and degree of chronicity. Against this background, the widespread expectation that long-standing conflicts can be rapidly resolved through individual discussions appears increasingly unrealistic. Peace may, under certain circumstances, require the same amount of time that previously contributed to the escalation.

The perhaps most important implication of this study therefore concerns prevention. If chronicity is the decisive risk factor, then early intervention to limit escalation processes appears to be the most effective form of intervention. Prevention does not, however, mean avoiding conflict. Conflicts are an inherent part of human relationships and fulfil important functions. What is decisive, rather, is whether conflicts remain resolvable or whether they develop into enduring organisational principles of family relationships. The earlier destructive dynamics can be recognised and contained, the greater the chances appear to be of preventing the development of chronic patterns of stress and threat.

This perspective also has implications for the evaluation of family court and family support systems. This study has developed the thesis that these systems do not stand outside the conflict, but rather become part of its dynamics themselves. Family courts, youth welfare services, counselling centres, legal representatives and experts do not merely react to existing conflicts, but influence their course. This gives rise to a special responsibility. A system originally designed to ensure legal certainty is increasingly being entrusted with the task of protecting the best interests of the child and positively influencing family development processes. These objectives overlap, but are not identical.

The work of Guerra González (2023, 2024, 2026) suggests that this may present a challenge that has so far been underestimated. Historically, family support and family court systems were not developed with the primary aim of preventing neurobiological chronicification processes. Their logic is based on investigation, assessment and decision-making. However, a focus on the best interests of the child also requires de-escalation, the protection of attachment and the promotion of development. The tension between these sets of objectives could explain why well-intentioned interventions do not always produce the desired effects. From this

perspective, the further development of family court procedures does not appear to be a criticism of existing institutions, but rather a necessary adaptation to new scientific findings.

The central thesis of this work is therefore not that neurobiology explains or even determines family conflicts. Rather, it is that neurobiological findings broaden the framework within which high levels of conflict can be understood. Chronic parental conflicts then no longer appear solely as a communication breakdown, a legal dispute or an expression of individual shortcomings. They become visible as processes that activate attachment systems, influence stress regulation, alter perception and, in doing so, help to shape the very conditions for cooperation, mediation and reconciliation.

It is precisely here that neurobiology's most important contribution to family court practice may lie. It serves as a reminder that human behaviour cannot be understood in isolation from its developmental and relational contexts. It draws attention to the importance of security, predictability and attachment. And it makes it clear that the most effective help for children and families may not lie in the retrospective resolution of chronic conflicts, but in preventing them from arising in the first place.

In this sense, this study offers a perspective that is both academically cautious and practically ambitious: high levels of conflict may not be entirely avoidable. However, their becoming chronic is neither inevitable nor a given. Research is increasingly providing evidence that this can be influenced – by parents, by professional support workers, by institutions and by societal conditions. The future of family court and family support systems may therefore lie less in the question of how conflicts are resolved, and more in how to prevent conflicts from becoming a long-term burden on children, parents and society.

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