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## G08-1817 Successful Transitions for High Conflict Families

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# Successful Transitions for High Conflict Families

Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator

High conflict families experiencing divorce and turmoil may find it difficult to think things through, unable to separate themselves from the problem to logically solve it. This publication points out common distresses of divorce on children, including visitation and shared custody, and how interactions can occur more calmly.

## What is a High Conflict Family?

Most divorces involve some conflict and some unwillingness to solve problems together. High conflict families experiencing divorce, turmoil, anger, and playing emotional games may be a continuous part of every interaction between parents whether children are present or not. High conflict families can be angry about custody, property issues, or the speed or lack of speed to the final divorce hearing. High conflict families solve problems with acrimony and anger — they react instead of respond to the situation. Reacting comes from the emotional part of us, while responding comes from the thinking part of us. High conflict families find it hard to think. They can't separate from the problem long enough to solve it using logical skills; They just can't find time to THINK! It is easier to just go with the gut reaction and react with emotional outbursts that can be very detrimental to children.

Eighty percent of divorces do not involve prolonged high conflict, but may experience conflict during the transition of the children from one home to the other home. For those 20 percent of every 1,000 divorces each year in the U.S. that involve high conflict, the legal separation or divorce is hard enough for children. However, the need to be on guard about conflict is mentally and physically overwhelming for them.

Conflict may arise over the time for pick-up and return or what the child will or will not be doing while in the care of the other parent. Dr. Edward Teyber says that visitation works best when it is frequent, regularly scheduled, and conflict free. When parents engage in conflict in front of the children, it only increases their confusion and fear. Children may withdraw from one or both parents to avoid being involved in any further confrontations. This may mean that they don't

want to “visit” the non-custodial parent because it always causes a fight. On the other hand, they may become a part of the confrontation by trying to protect or show loyalty for the parent in the “underdog” role.

The High Conflict Intervention Program in San Diego, Calif. suggests it takes approximately 72 hours for someone to calm down after a negative interaction, especially during the first two years after divorce. The release of the “flight or fight” response means adrenaline defends and protects the individual instead of being calm and able to think the situation through.

If there is a face-to-face exchange with conflict on Friday and on Sunday night transitions, and then again in the middle of the week, the parents and children never have a chance to calm down. Because children permanently are scarred by these chronic outbursts, parents should focus everything they can to stop in the presence of children. Two simple solutions: Stop the face-to-face contact and reduce verbal communication. This will reduce the conflict by 75 percent immediately. Telephone calls and text messages should get directly to the issue and not be used as a “stalking” mechanism or another way to carry on the conflict. It is simply too costly for your finances and nonproductive for the best interest of children.

## Avoid Parent Alienation

Parent alienation is when one parent consciously tries to turn the child against the other parent. Some parents may say mean things as a way to vent their anger at the other parent, but they don't really mean to alienate the child from the parent. It is very different when a parent sets out to consciously destroy the relationship between the child and the other parent.

It is not unusual after divorce for a child to feel more comfortable with one parent than the other. This probably is the relationship that was more strongly in place before the divorce. All children naturally relate more to one or the other of their parents, based on personalities and parenting styles. After divorce, the physical break in the relationship of living in two homes puts stress on any parent/child relationship. Some children feel bored when they go for shared parenting

time. It isn't home. It is likely a new environment and the parent needs to work with the children to make sure they feel comfortable in the new place. Building new memories in the new place also will help.

True parent alienation begins when one parent continually makes rude and damaging remarks about the other parent in front of the children with the purpose of trying to make the child see how "bad" the other parent is. From rude comments, parent alienation can escalate to not allowing the children to see the other parent at all or actually moving so the child will not have any physical contact with the other parent. In some families, which can't afford to fight custody battles in court, children may be estranged from one of their parents for a lifetime because of a manipulative parent who is trying to "protect" the child.

If there is a reason for the child to be protected from the other parent, the court should know and a restraining order or supervised visitation will be implemented. It is not up to parents alone to stop visitation if the court has ordered shared parenting time.

The emotional fallout for a child who has to live in a home where parent alienation is practiced is enormously damaging to mental and emotional development, as well as detrimental to the formation of stable, trusting relationships in the future. These highly disruptive relationships where children are used as bargaining chips can many times evolve into messy court battles, and in some extreme cases, abduction by one or the other parent — NEVER in the best legal or emotional interest of the child.

### **Communicating With Respect**

You are teaching your child about respect and problem-solving every time you interact with your former spouse. When parents can stay connected for the purpose of guiding children through the difficulties of growing up, the children experience fewer feelings of loss, confusion, abandonment, anger, and rage. R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Children model behaviors they see their parents exhibit. Are you showing respect?

To avoid conflict and displays of disrespect, use a business framework to communicate with your former spouse. Think of a 3- by 4-inch notepad. Everything worth saying about the issue should fit on that notepad. Keep it short, simple, to-the-point, non-emotional. Just the facts. Say it in outline form! Use only nouns and verbs and leave out those very descriptive adjectives that might create an emotional exchange. Remember when Mom said, "If you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all," and "Count to 10 before you answer?" Boy, did Mom know what she was talking about!

Another good suggestion is to use an "I" message to express how you feel and how you would like things to change. This works well with parents and children. Here is an example using a common issue.

1<sup>st</sup> Parent: "I am disappointed Jason was not picked up on time. He worries you don't want to be with him and you might have forgotten to pick him up. Next time, could you call him if you are going to be late?"

2<sup>nd</sup> Parent: "Yes, I apologize for not calling Jason. I will call him next time as soon as I know that I might be late, so he won't worry."

2<sup>nd</sup> Parent: "I feel like you take the times that I have been late and use them against me. Then, Jason seems to be mad at me when I pick him up. Could you please avoid making assumptions about my lateness and simply suggest that Jason call me if he is worried?"

1<sup>st</sup> Parent: "I suppose that would work better for all of us."

### **Ease Transition Times**

Transitions are the times when children go from the care of one parent to the care of the other parent. This often is referred to as "Shared Parenting Time" or visitation. If the parents are sharing joint legal and physical custody in the same town, when children are school-age and older, it is easiest if they spend one week at one house and one week at the other house. If the parents do not live in the same town, or if the "shared parenting time" goes from the custodial to the non-custodial parent during the week and every other weekend, there are many opportunities for tension to arise during the transition from parent to the other. Suggestions to ease these tensions include:

- Set a concrete time for pick-up that meets everyone's schedules.
- Determine a consistent return time, but realize some flexibility may be required.
- Exchange children in a neutral location.
- If needed, make the transition at school on Friday afternoon and Monday morning.
- Use a businesslike attitude to communicate with the former spouse.
- Invite help from family or friends to make the actual exchange.
- Respect your child's right to spend time with both parents.
- Save unpleasant thoughts and comments for your private moments away from the kids.

### **Develop a Parenting Plan**

In many states a Parenting Plan must be filed at the time of the final divorce hearing. This plan is a legal guide written in the best interest of the children for shared parenting time with both parents.

Parenting Times work best if there is a minimum of 48 hours on weekends or overnight on weekdays. The shorter the time together, the greater the indicators of emotional frustration and acting out behaviors. Loss of power and control is a major issue for children of divorce and should be considered in the discussion by parents before making the final parenting plan.

- Post a family calendar with the parenting times prominently marked.
- Help the child ready their travel bag, including something that comforts them.
- Talk about when and where the exchange will take place.
- Make the exchange in a neutral location, such as a relative's home or at school.
- Encourage children to think about the special times with the other parent.
- Remind the child and the other parent of the return time and location.
- Teach kids to problem-solve so if they forget something, they are in control of the issue.
- Give kids time to unwind when they come home at the beginning or end of a visit.
- Practice relaxation techniques; Close your eyes, breathe in and out slowly.
- Be prepared to use active listening skills and "I" messages before and after the exchange.

### Checklist for Shared Parenting Time

It is always good to have a mental checklist when helping children prepare for shared parenting time. This also is a great time to involve children in taking control of the situation. Help them develop a checklist so they can remember to bring home everything they take with them. It might look something like this:

- Clothing
- Coat, hat, gloves
- Underwear
- Shoes
- Backpack
- Homework
- MP3 player
- Water bottle
- Medication and directions for taking it
- Laminated medical emergency card
- Books, games
- Sports equipment

### Bottom Line for Parents

Divorce is an adult choice. There will be conflicting feelings for everyone involved in the relationships. Transition times are difficult because it brings the reality of a "separated" family into clear view for everyone to see. "Family" is important to children. They want to love both parents and it is possible for them to manipulate the situation to get parents together — even if they are arguing. At least they are together! They are trying to reunite "the dream" of their family. It is important for parents to remain focused on the best interests of the children at all times when exchanging information, material items, or the children.

### Resources

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