

# Navigating Family Change

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*Basic Seminar and  
Advanced Issues in Co-Parenting  
Workbook*



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**[www.cnfc.org](http://www.cnfc.org)**

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# Who we are...



The *Center for Navigating Family Change* is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization that provides court-ordered educational seminars in Gwinnett and DeKalb counties, as well as other resources and co-parenting help.

Visit our web site at [www.cnfc.org](http://www.cnfc.org) where you will find:

- Details and registration links for *Navigating Family Change* in English and Spanish
- Articles on divorce and co-parenting topics
- Help for parents and professionals regarding our co-parenting services
- Links to helpful websites and community outreach resources
- Suggested reading list for parents and children
- Contact information for seminar presenters

Like us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/CNFC](http://www.facebook.com/CNFC)



# Our mission...

**We exist to provide educational opportunities, activities, resources and therapeutic support to parents and children who are part of families in transition, such as those experiencing divorce, separation or other domestic change. *To make a tax-deductible donation, go to [www.cnfc.org/giving](http://www.cnfc.org/giving).***

# Before we get started...

## Certificates of Completion

- During the online class, the presenters will periodically give numbers for the four-digit code that you will need to submit so that you can receive your certificate. Please pay attention so you do not miss one of the numbers because they will not be repeating them later in the class. At the end of the seminar, you will be provided with a link to enter in the code, which will trigger the certificate, with your name on it, to the email address you provide. CNFC does not submit your certificate to your county, so it is up to participants to ensure their certificate becomes part of their case files in their respective counties. If you are unsure how to do this, please call the county where your case is filed to get further guidance.

## Seminar Participation

- When you log onto the seminar with the Zoom link provided to you upon registration, you will be placed in a waiting room. A CNFC staff member will check your registration information and admit you to the seminar. Please make sure your name is correct on the screen and that you are in “selfie” mode so that the staff can verify that you are present. There will be two 10-minute breaks during the seminar, so please use those for restroom breaks and other necessities. However, if you must leave for a few minutes, return as soon as possible. If you are away from your video for a long period of time, staff will place you back in the waiting room. If you are placed there more than once, you may be removed from the seminar completely and required to re-register and pay again for a future seminar. ***PLEASE DO NOT DRIVE WHILE VIEWING THE SEMINAR and choose a time when you will not be burdened with child care or work responsibilities. Some think this is unfair, however, if you were attending the seminar in person, as was the requirement prior to the COVID pandemic, these distractions would not be permitted. The online experience is equally important and deserves your undivided attention.***

## Domestic Violence

- If domestic violence is part of your separation or divorce experience, your safety is vitally important to us. Some of the advice the presenters give regarding co-parenting may not be safe or appropriate for you, especially if you have a Temporary Protective Order or Restraining Order of any type in place. If you are not sure whether something the presenters say would be safe for you, please talk to one of the presenters during one of the breaks and give them more information about your situation. Then they can advise or clarify for you what would be appropriate for your situation.

## Questions During or After the Class

- If you have questions DURING the class, there will be Q&A breaks throughout the seminar. If the presenters think your question will be answered at another point in the class, they may defer answering until then. The presenters welcome questions from the audience as that helps them to customize their talk to the audience’s needs. There are no stupid questions and please ask as many as you need to! However, understand that there are dozens of other people in the class, so please be respectful regarding how much you share so that others can also participate. Also, you may send written questions or comments through the chat function on Zoom that the presenters will be directed to occasionally. Unlike in-person classes, audience questions can be difficult to recognize, but we know they are important and will try our best to make time for them.

## **Be Patient!**

- Although we get feedback quite often that the seminar is too long, we are required by most Georgia counties to spend **four hours** discussing particular subjects, and the presenters generalize their material to the broad population. Since human behavior is not an exact science, some of the information may not be applicable to your particular situation since your experience may be the exception, not the rule. The presenters have no way of knowing who is in the room and what their particular stories are. Therefore, we ask for your patience if something is said that does not apply to you, since it likely does apply to many others in the room.
- If you have a situation that includes parental abuse or neglect, some of the concepts taught in this class may not be applicable to your situation. The presenters teach the concepts that generally apply in most families in transition, in which abuse and neglect are not typical factors.
- We use the word “divorce” quite a bit in the class out of convenience, but that does not mean we are discounting those of you who may be here due to a modification, legitimation or guardianship. Although some of the class information may not be geared to your situation, there is much information that applies to everyone, such as how to respond to your children’s feelings and the co-parenting information. Rest assured there is something in the class for everyone.
- You also may disagree with something that is said during the seminar. Again, because this is not an exact science, the presenters will use what they know about research and statistical data, as well as their professional and personal experiences, to relay information to you. Feel free to respectfully express your disagreement, however, understand it is our goal to provide as much information as possible to make this a helpful experience in some way for each participant — not to prove or disprove particular points that are likely debatable depending on individual experiences.

## **Technical Issues**

- If you have any technical issues, you will be provided with a contact number and email address at the beginning of the class that will connect you with a CNFC staff member who is observing and monitoring class participation. He/she will be able to provide you with as much help on our end to make your experience as productive as possible. Issues on your end such as low bandwidth or internet problems are your responsibility, so please test those on your end prior to the class time.

## **Ultimate Goals of this Experience**

- Most likely, you have been ordered to attend this seminar as part of your pending case requirements. Courts do so because they want to help you, not punish you. Divorce and separation is a major challenge for children as well as adults. It is our desire that you leave this class today feeling more hopeful and encouraged than when you arrived.
- We think you will learn a lot of information that will help you set emotional and practical boundaries with your co-parent as well as your children. From that perspective, it is our desire that you either leave here feeling empowered by new information, validated by what you already know and do, or have a better understanding of how you, your ex-partner and your children are feeling.

### **OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES:**

[www.cnfc.org](http://www.cnfc.org)  
[www.facebook.com/CNFC](http://www.facebook.com/CNFC)  
[www.CPDilemmas.com](http://www.CPDilemmas.com)

# Table of Contents

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## Part One: The Basic Seminar

Agenda & Break-Out Sessions .....	6
Understanding Your Part in the Break-Up .....	8
YOU as a Co-Parent .....	9-10
YOU as a Single Parent .....	11-13
Grief as a Result of Family Change .....	14-15
A Well-Written Parenting Plan .....	16

## Part Two: Advanced Issues in Co-Parenting

Conflict Starts with Assumptions .....	18
Ten Rules for Communication .....	19
Behaviors that Damage Children .....	20
What's So Bad about Conflict? .....	21
Meet Your Own Parenting Goals .....	22
Structured Email Protocol .....	23
Neutralizing Toxic Communication .....	26
Case Studies .....	28

## Appendices

<b>APPENDIX A:</b> What Do I Say When My Child Says...? .....	30
<b>APPENDIX B:</b> Ages & Stages: Needs of Children of Divorce .....	31
<b>APPENDIX C:</b> Five Rules to Keep Kids Out of the Middle .....	34
<b>APPENDIX D:</b> Protocol for Structured Email Communication .....	35
<b>APPENDIX E:</b> Symptoms of Parental Alienation .....	38
References .....	40





# Part One: The Basic Seminar

# Understanding Your Part

*Couples separate for a variety of reasons and rarely do they agree on those reasons. One person typically decides to leave the relationship and keeps that desire quiet for some time before telling his/her partner. This can lead to numerous communication problems and issues. The person who decides to leave is not the only one to blame, although that's usually how it is perceived by the one being left. In order to manage conflict, it is important for both parents to understand their own role in the break-up of the relationship. When both parents take responsibility for some part (not usually equal parts) of the break-up, they are more likely to navigate their divorce or separation with much less anger and hostility. This is good for the kids. If you have trouble taking responsibility for your part right now, it should be one of your goals as you move forward. When parents mutually agree that they both had a part in the break-up, they are less likely to put the kids in the middle of the conflict.*

## **KEY POINTS:**

- **You are not alone. Many people experience divorce and separation for a variety of reasons: abandonment, adultery, substance abuse, irresponsibility, mental illness, or simply realizing that a poor choice was made. The reason doesn't matter to the children's welfare as much as how you handle the conflict. It's important to get the emotional divorce and begin to turn blame-placing into problem-solving.**
- **Take responsibility for something, even if it is as simple as exploring what you tolerated in your relationship that you should have addressed more openly.**
- **Take time to look at your relationship patterns. If you don't, you are likely to repeat your relationship mistakes. If you want to change your choice, and have a better experience in the future, you must change the chooser!**
- **Practice "divorcing behaviors," especially if the other parent is wanting to continue the relationship and you do not. Acting as if you are still going to be an intact family, even though you are getting a divorce, sends mixed messages to the other parent and the children. It may create confusion or a false sense of hope. Everyone must experience their grief in their own time. Let them grieve by being kind and staying true to what you say you want. Reconciliation can happen ONLY if both people are willing. If you are not, don't pretend in order to let the other person down gently. It will only create more hurt.**

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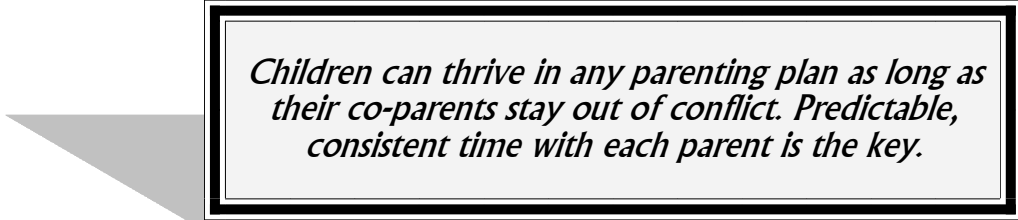


# YOU as a Co-Parent

*The goals of co-parenting are much different from the goals of keeping a romantic relationship intact. Instead of working on gaining understanding, approval, affirmation, and respect from your ex-partner, you both need to stay focused on the only goal that matters going forward: Do whatever is necessary to stay out of conflict for the sake of the children – even if it doesn't feel fair. Co-parenting isn't about fairness, but about allowing your child to navigate this difficult family situation in a way that they are able to grow and mature as normal, well-adjusted children. It calls for practical instead of emotional interaction. It may require one parent to do all the right things when the other parent is doing all the wrong things. It demands that at least ONE parent remains stable, predictable, steady and loving throughout the initial dysfunction of divorce/separation and as far into the future as necessary. If both parents commit to these, children can do remarkably well. If only one of you can, they will thank you someday. It's all up to you.*

## KEY POINTS:

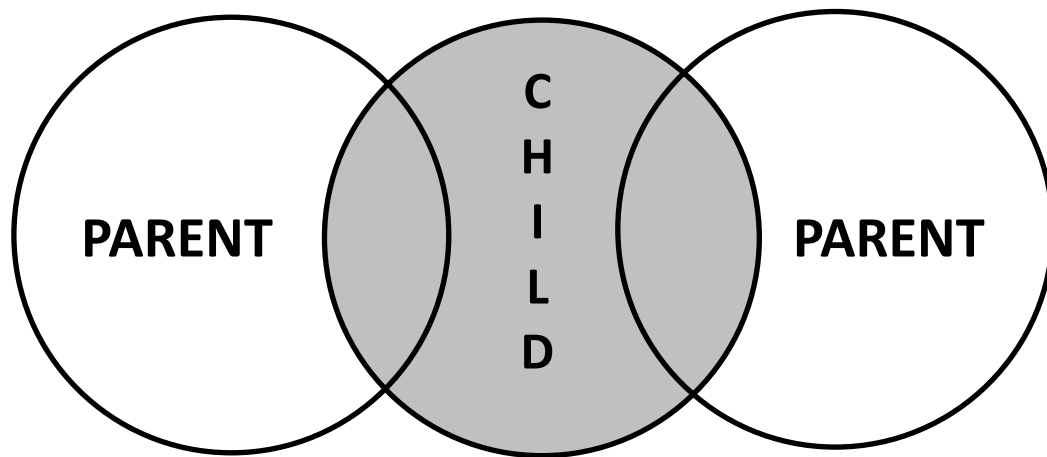
- **It's not over when the legal documents are signed.**
- **You will need to practice being respectful even after your grandchildren are born!**
- **Don't expect in divorce what you didn't get in marriage. If your ex was irresponsible with time, money and emotions, expect the same after the divorce.**
- **There is no longer any leverage between you: the leverage and accountability is with the court order and with the Judge, NOT with each other.**
- **The only things that matter now between you: Where do the kids need to be, how will they get to and from, and how much will it cost?**
- **Cooperative parenting = *frequent* communication, flexibility and negotiation**
- **Parallel parenting = *minimal* communication, *minimal* flexibility and *minimal* negotiation**
- **If you can cooperate, do so! If you can't, follow the court order to reduce opportunities for conflict. Kids do fine as long as their parents can remain respectful and civil.**



*Children can thrive in any parenting plan as long as their co-parents stay out of conflict. Predictable, consistent time with each parent is the key.*

# What are Healthy Co-Parent Boundaries?

*Co-parents are most effective when each parent has his/her own life separate and apart from each other, and they only interact when it has to do with the needs of the child. When co-parent boundaries overlap, it increases the risk for conflict. It is best, then, to treat the co-parent relationship as a healthy working relationship with interaction only around a common goal (as you would with a co-worker, boss, or any other business-style relationship). This helps to promote respectful communication and makes it easier for the child to navigate after separation and divorce, especially when the parents move on to other romantic relationships.*



## How to Protect Kids from Co-Parent Conflict

- ⇒ Don't ask them to relay messages or keep secrets from the other parent.
- ⇒ Don't have co-parenting conversations in front of them and don't make plans with the children on the other parent's time.
- ⇒ Protect children in a moment of potential conflict and deal with legal issues later.
- ⇒ Respect the other parent's role, even if you don't respect him/her as a person.
- ⇒ Both parents have a right to time with the children via the court order.
- ⇒ Both parents have a right to their rules and authority in their own households.
- ⇒ Both parents have a right to share their opinions (respectfully and without expecting anything to change because an opinion is shared).
- ⇒ If sharing joint legal custody, both parents have a right to give input with ample notice before a major decision is made by the parent with final say.
- ⇒ Develop a well-written parenting plan and follow it with few exceptions.

# YOU as a Single Parent

*There is nothing more important than your children as you go through this difficult time. How you speak to them, what you say to them, and the example you live before them will make ALL the difference in their post-separation state of mind. Research over the last several decades proves that the number one factor that determines how children fare after their parents separate or divorce is the amount of co-parent conflict they are aware of or exposed to. It is vitally important, then, that what you say, how you say it, and how you live, send the message that their lives are more important than the conflict about them. Fortunately, despite what the other parent does, you have a great deal of power (regardless of the number of days you spend with your children) to show you are stable, predictable, consistent and dependable in your love and care for them. Although things can be rocky in the beginning, kids will gravitate over time toward the value system lived by the parent who provides a stable and loving environment, in which there are appropriate boundaries and emotional safety, so they can be responsible kids and be their unique selves. If BOTH parents do this, kids can do remarkably well!*

## KEY POINTS:

- **When in the presence of your child or within ear-shot of your child, remove your “wounded partner” hat and put on your “responsible parent” one.**
- **Tell your kids you want to hear everything they are thinking and feeling, even if it is about the other parent. Send the message that you can handle it, even if it is hard to hear. Otherwise, they will learn to keep quiet.**
- **Balancing discipline and nurturing is difficult. Each parent has work to do to bring both into balance after separation.**
- **To respond well as a parent, understand that your child (1) has no life experience, (2) is self-centered, and (3) may reject you on occasion. Managing expectations about these things is vital to your parenting experience with them. See APPENDIX A for further help.**
- **To respond well and teach your child about how relationships work, you must understand the importance of feelings, thinking (logic) and beliefs (values). All three are important in developing and managing relationships.**
- **EVERYTHING you say to your child teaches something, whether negative or positive. Responding as a parent instead of a wounded partner will ensure that you are teaching your values, not confusing your children with your negative emotions.**

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# Strive for the Authoritative Style of Parenting

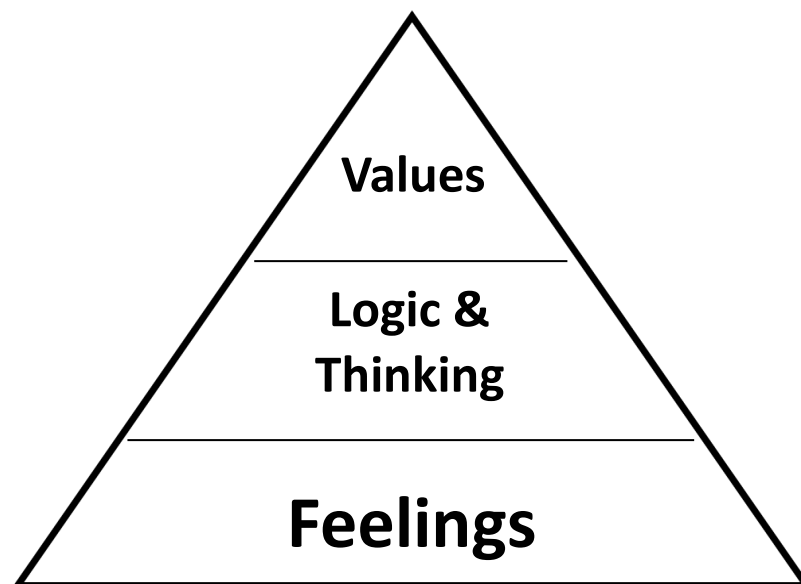
*A child who grows up with an authoritative parent is more likely to see herself /himself as a valuable individual in a loving partnership as an adult.*

## KEY POINTS:

- **Respectful boundaries are modeled by the parent**
- **Child's level of freedom is determined by age and demonstrated responsibility**
- **Child has a voice, but parent has the final authority**
- **Home is a mini-representation of the real world, where**
  - **Authority matters**
  - **Responsible behavior earns rewards**
  - **Respect is earned through integrity**

## The Feelings–Thoughts–Values Connection

*Values become clear when we are able to trust our feelings, but manage them with wise logic and thinking. Teaching this is one of the greatest responsibilities of parenting.*

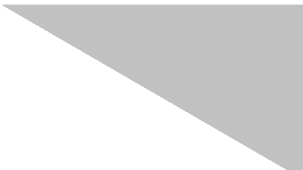


*The difference between lecturing and listening depends on your ability to acknowledge and normalize your child's feelings!*

# Talking about change...

*There is no way to talk to children about family change that will keep them from feeling negative emotions (sad, angry, worried, etc.). However, consider these points to help them feel as safe and cared for as possible:*

- **Talk to your kids as soon as you are sure about upcoming family changes. Talking too soon (if you are still working on the relationship) can create unnecessary worry. Waiting too long risks they will find out from other sources.**
- **Children need affirmation more than information. Tell them this isn't their fault and that your love for them is different than romantic/partner love, so they don't worry about losing your love like the other parent did.**
- **Talk to the children together if you can do so without conflict. Have a pre-conversation so there will be no surprises. If you cannot do it together, do it separately without being negative about the other parent. Conversations should focus on the child's world: school, friends, activities and chores. Talking about other subjects creates a sense in them that they must take a side, which is unfair and destructive.**
- **When kids ask, "Why?" tell them you and the other parent do not agree on the answer to that question, and that if you told them your side of the story they would feel like they had to take a side, which wouldn't be fair to them.**
- **In all that you say and do, protect your children's self-esteem by not saying negative words about the other parent. Protect them from harmful information that would keep them up at night worrying. Take a protective tone, not a secretive one, and although they may be frustrated with the lack of information, they will understand one day why you said and did what you did.**
- **When the children tell you something the other parent said about you, tell them you are sorry they got put in the middle because it hurts when anyone talks badly about our parents. Then tell them to *judge you by what they know about you, not by what they hear about you*. Don't defend. Don't share your side of the story. That only keeps them wondering which parent is lying. Thinking that both parents might be liars causes a child to feel hopeless about being able to trust anyone in their lives.**



*If children need to know that their other parent is not a good person, they will find out all on their own. If they never find out, maybe they never needed to know.*

# Grief as a Result of Family Change

*Grieving is a normal emotional process following extreme loss or change. Everyone goes through it differently, so you will not likely experience it in a linear form, as it is discussed in this class. Grief comes in cycles and certain stages tend to repeat themselves over time. Some stages may be more intense or longer lasting than others, depending on the person and circumstances. The good news is that the process becomes less intense over time and the number of cycles decreases over time. Typically, after about two years from onset, the grief subsides completely and more normal life resumes. Divorce ranks second, after death of a loved one, in the intensity and length of the grieving process that follows the event. Even if you are content with the fact that you are separating from your partner, you are likely to experience grief simply because you can't escape the many changes that result from a decision like divorce or separation, especially when children are involved.*

## **DENIAL**

- ***“I think this is just a phase we’re going through. It won’t last and eventually, everything will return to the way it was.”***
  - **Engage in divorcing behaviors to avoid sending the message there is hope.**
  - **Beware of setting precedents with the other parent that may be unrealistic for the future (e.g. after one or both of you move on with other partners).**
  - **Be patient if the children or the other parent is in denial.**
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## **ANGER**

- ***“I can’t believe this is happening to me! What if? What if? What if?”***
  - **Understand your triggers and what it feels like to be at the point of no return.**
  - **Don’t engage the other parent in “hot” topics that are only going to fuel anger on both sides. Have your attorneys deal with difficult issues or engage the services of a mediator (third-party facilitator), who can help you achieve a safe conversation/resolution.**
  - **Take a time out and do something physical to counteract your fight-or-flight response.**
  - **While in time-out, think about and respond with self-respecting words and behaviors.**
  - **Talk to kids about anger and what to do with it (when you are not angry).**
  - **Tell children what is acceptable and unacceptable angry behavior.**
  - **Have consequences for unacceptable anger and allow time-outs to redirect them.**
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## BARGAINING

- *“Maybe if I do something differently, things will go back to the way they were or get better.”*
  - Hindsight: You may be obsessing about what you could have done differently to change the course of negative events.
  - Your children may bargain by trying to be better helpers, more obedient, or your personal confidants, in order to keep this from happening or to fix your emotions.
  - Some children may act out in order to bring their parents together around their only common interest: the children.
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## DEPRESSION

- *“I can’t understand this. I can’t fix this. I don’t know what to do with this. I’m tired of being angry. I’m just tired. I don’t feel like myself anymore.”*
  - Symptoms are eating and sleeping disturbances, memory and concentration problems, extreme physical fatigue, lack of motivation, and feelings of sadness, isolation and self-directed anger.
  - Most people experience a reactive depression and resolve it on their own.
  - Some people are prone to a major clinical depression due to a personal or family history, or due to extreme circumstances.
  - Seek counseling or medical help if your dysfunction becomes life altering.
  - Talk to children in an age-appropriate way about the grief process in general so they will not be scared if they experience some of the intense emotions of grief.
  - Discuss the problems associated with teens using drugs or alcohol to escape their feelings.
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## ACCEPTANCE

- *“I see the light at the end of the tunnel. I think I can do this. I think I will be okay. I think with my help, my kids will be okay, too.”*
  - Be patient with the other parent if you reach acceptance before he/she does.
  - Children tend to get to acceptance quicker than adults because it is a different kind of loss for them than it is for their parents.
  - Refrain from pulling children into your adult grief process through your words or actions.
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# A Well-Written Parenting Plan

*A good foundation for effective co-parenting is a well-written parenting plan. The court's highest hope for you is that you will put together a very structured, detailed and easy to interpret parenting plan, and then put it aside and agree to do whatever you decide to do as parents. Co-parents do not have to follow it if they can agree otherwise. However, if you disagree about your co-parenting responsibilities at any point, the court-ordered plan is there to dictate your decisions. Keep in mind that the court expects you to follow it when doing otherwise would cause conflict. Often cooperative parents find themselves at odds with one another when one parent remarries or gets involved with a significant other. Emotions and conflict might flare up at that point, creating strain in the co-parent relationship. If you are being cooperative now, that is great, and we hope you will continue on that path. But if, for some reason, cooperation is no longer possible, it will serve you well to have a well-written and clear court-ordered parenting plan in place to avoid future disagreements. Since co-parent conflict is the number one factor that determines how children fare after separation and divorce, having a good parenting plan in place should serve as a productive blueprint for the business of co-parenting – now and in the future.*

## **KEY POINTS:**

- **Make your parenting plan detailed. Be clear about days, times, transportation and exchange points – covering every day of the year.**
- **Make it enforceable. Be careful about using language that is likely to create conflict instead of curb it (e.g. “parties will respect one another”). Use concrete language with clear consequences and remedies, not abstract language that can be interpreted differently by each of you.**
- **Customize your plan to your particular needs. Look to the past to determine what is likely to create conflict in your co-parent relationship and address issues in your plan to avoid those same conflicts in the future. For example, if you are prone to fighting about money, be sure to be very clear how things will be paid for, who will pay, and how reimbursement will be handled.**
- **Be sure to include detailed language about how input regarding major decisions will be requested and received when one parent has “final say” on medical, education, extra-curricular and religious issues (areas covered by joint legal custody).**
- **Include a structured communication plan to avoid one parent holding the other “hostage” with demands to engage in frequent communication in order to co-parent.**
- **A structured plan helps each of you to set appropriate boundaries with the other, while providing a necessary framework and productive forum for effective co-parenting. See APPENDIX D for an example.**



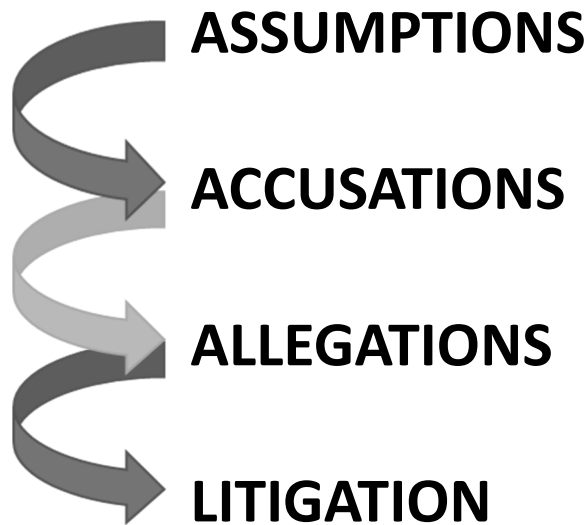


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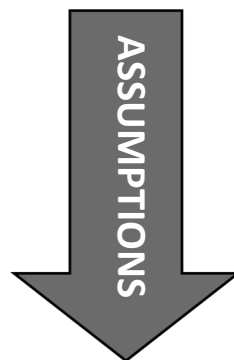
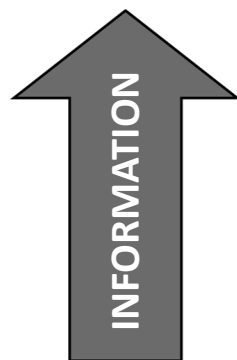
## Advanced Issues in Co-Parenting Workshop

# Conflict Starts with Assumptions

*You may have a long negative history with your co-parent who has taught you what to expect. Be careful, however, that you don't always assume you are right about their motivations. By the time a romantic relationship has fallen apart, each partner typically has developed a very negative view of the other. This negative view can extend into the co-parenting relationship to the point that everything the other parent does is viewed as vicious, intentional or negative by the other parent. This is often the foundation for most co-parent conflict. It is important, then, to communicate in a practical manner, giving the other parent the benefit of the doubt before automatically assuming the worst. Respectful and practical communication that focuses only on the present and future, and provides an exchange of information that limits questions, is the remedy for reducing assumptions.*



*Reduce assumptions by increasing information!*



# Ten Rules for Communication

1. **Watch your tone** (pretend your child is behind your shoulder, reading everything you are about to write to the other parent. Would it make your child proud?)
2. **Avoid emotional and sarcastic language.** It is not productive.
3. **Stick to the facts** to reduce assumptions.
4. **Use bullet points** so you are not tempted to write long paragraphs that the other parent won't likely be inspired to read.
5. **Avoid using absolutes** (every time, you always, I never...). They are rarely true and only serve to fuel the fire.
6. **Don't bring up the past.** Most likely, the other parent will interpret it much differently.
7. **Take a period of time before responding** to the other parent's communication (unless it is an emergency) to check your emotions and choose your words wisely.
8. **Ask someone to help you** If you have trouble being business-like (a spouse, friend, family member, or professional). If you were writing a critical letter to your boss, you would likely do this. Don't treat your co-parent relationship as if it doesn't matter. How YOU manage it is critical to your child's health and welfare.
9. **Do your part.** You can't make the other parent follow the rules, so do what you can on your end so that you are not disrespecting the co-parent relationship. If you avoid or attack, you put yourself at risk. Engage respectfully, even if you have to fake it.
10. **Limit communication** to only the business of the children if you have a difficult co-parent. Then live your life as joyfully as you can. Divorce should simply be a painful chapter in your children's lives. It shouldn't define their whole childhood or your entire life. Put it in perspective and move on.

*Treat your co-parent relationship like a business,  
showing respect for each others' role, even  
if you don't feel it!*

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# Behaviors that Damage Children

Many co-parent interactions or parenting behaviors are not detrimental to children of divorce. Kids can tolerate a lot of parental mistakes (thank goodness!). There are a few behaviors, however, that if allowed to persist over time, can cause emotional damage to a child now and into their adulthood.

## Co-parent conflict – especially, in the presence of the children

- \* **Overt:** arguing, yelling and talking negatively to or about the other parent
- \* **Covert:** negative body language, eye-rolling, sarcasm about the other parent

## Marginalization and parental alienation (see APPENDIX E)

- \* **Saying or doing things to interfere with the other parent’s role or to negatively influence the relationship between child and parent**

## Failure to understand child development (see APPENDIX B)

- \* **Expecting a child to understand adult concepts**
- \* **Expecting a child to take care of adult emotions**
- \* **Misunderstanding what children can realistically process for their age and emotional development**

*Undermining the other parent in any way not only hurts the parent/child bond, but creates distorted ideas about love and relationships. This can have long-term negative consequences in your child’s adult life.*

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# What's So Bad about Conflict?

*Only about 30 percent of parents are able to be cooperative after separation or divorce and, for the most part, are able to avoid emotional damage to the children. However, about 70 percent cannot achieve the kind of cooperation that makes it easier on kids. Some parents engage in conflict to the point that repeat litigation has been necessary, which is harmful to children. Parallel parenting is the best option for parents who are not able to cooperate effectively and who are at risk for returning to the court for one more round of fighting. Children can do very well with parents who engage in parallel parenting, as long as the parents can achieve the bare minimum of respectful and civil interaction in front of the children. For some, even that is difficult because of intense emotions and differences in how each parent views their co-parent relationship. Managing expectations and learning how to show respect for one another's role, even if you don't feel it, is paramount to protecting the children from the harm that could be caused by your dysfunctional co-parent relationship.*

## KEY POINTS:

**Negative effects of co-parent conflict are: emotional, relational and personal**

- ⇒ **Emotional:** When children are at the center of their parents' conflict, it often creates anxiety for them. When they begin to feel that they cannot control the conflict, the anxiety often leads to depression. This can affect their academic performance as well as their behavioral choices.
  
- ⇒ **Relational:** When children are exposed to two different perceptions of the "truth," they often get frustrated because they don't know which parent is the liar. This can lead to trust issues in all of their relationships. Also, when one parent villainizes the other parent for the smallest mistakes, a child can learn unrealistic expectations about relationships and feel that others must be perfect in order to be good, which is likely to affect their friendships and future romantic relationships.
  
- ⇒ **Personal:** Children who hear a lot of negative comments about either parent tend to think more negatively about themselves since they feel part of both parents. Additionally, children who are conditioned to have to manage their parents' feelings in order to keep them out of conflict will often have trouble managing their own feelings, not being sure if they are allowed to be honest and true to themselves.

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# Meet Your Own Parenting Goals

*Fear and worry are normal emotions while going through a relationship separation or divorce, especially when children are involved. These emotions can persist over many years if parents cannot gain confidence in their own parenting and relationship skills with their children. Regardless of what many co-parents think about the other parent, the unconditional love that ALL parents feel for their children is an extremely powerful motivator to do the right things. Although some parents struggle to display their unconditional love because of personal insecurities or other factors, that does not mean the love is missing or non-existent — it may simply be a struggle for them to show or execute it in a healthy way. Therefore, getting too focused on what the other parent is or is not doing for the children, how they might be emotionally hurting the children, or what their motivations are for their parenting, only keeps the healthy parent imprisoned by fear and worry. Instead it is better to determine what your own personal parenting goals are and focus on providing what is necessary to meet those goals.*

## What Will My Child Say about Me?

**FIVE YEARS FROM NOW, YOU OVERHEAR YOUR CHILD TALKING TO A FRIEND.  
HE/SHE SAYS,**

*“My family went through a divorce when I was younger. It was difficult, but it turned out okay because my mother/father:*

\_\_\_\_\_.”

**HOW WOULD YOU LIKE THEM TO FILL IN THE BLANK ABOUT YOU?**

### KEY POINTS:

- ⇒ **NO ONE** can stop you from giving your kids what they need from you.
- ⇒ You can turn the feeling of powerlessness into opportunities to help and bond with your children.

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# Structured Email Protocol

*The best case scenario for co-parent communication is that both parents are mature and recognize the need to stay out of conflict for the sake of the kids. However, when one or both parents are not able to do that without getting emotional, bringing up the past, being accusatory, condescending, or any number of other tactics that create unnecessary conflict, a structured email protocol is the best solution. A structured way of communicating gives co-parents a way to share information that they are required to share per their joint legal custody status and per the provisions set out in their court ordered parenting plan. Following the structured protocol as outlined in this workbook helps co-parents minimize extraneous conversation (that often leads to conflict) and protects both parents from being accused by the other of poor or absent co-parent communication. If the protocol becomes part of the court order, it also offers protection from the court, if followed correctly. Below is a brief description of the email protocol, but a more in-depth explanation can be found in APPENDIX D.*

## WEEKLY EMAIL PROTOCOL

<p><b><u>INITIATOR</u></b></p> <p><b>FYI (For Your Information)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Helpful info (about the child)</li><li>• Respectful opinions ("I am concerned that...")</li><li>• Clarifications (to avoid confusion)</li></ul> <p><b>RR (Requested Response)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions you are entitled to have answered per the court order</li></ul>	<p><b><u>RESPONDER</u></b></p> <p><b>ANSWERS TO RRs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Copy and paste initiator's RRs so they won't be missed.</li></ul> <p><b>FYI (For Your Information)</b></p> <p><b>RR (Requested Response)</b></p>
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*NOTE: Initiator sends third/final email within 24 hours, only to answer Responder's RRs (but it is not needed if there are no RRs to answer). If you do not have anything to share or ask, send your email on time anyway with "None" under each heading. REMEMBER: FYIs do NOT require a response.*

DO use bullet points, a business-like tone, and stick to the facts.

DON'T make assumptions, accuse/defend, or bring up the past.

**CLIP THE ABOVE PROTOCOL AND KEEP NEAR YOUR DESKTOP  
OR LAPTOP FOR CONVENIENCE!**

# Are You Under or Over?

Oftentimes, co-parents replay their old emotional relationship by acting out the pursuer-distancer pattern. One parent over-communicates (which can feel attacking) and the other parent learns to retreat from communication to avoid conflict (which can feel ignoring). All this does is promote more conflict. In these cases, the under-communicator needs to learn to give enough information to reduce assumptions and minimize questions. The over-communicator needs to learn to ask for more information from the other parent before reacting to assumptions based on past history.

## THE UNDER-COMMUNICATOR

**FYI:**

- Johnny has a baseball game this week.
- He's failing a class this semester.
- In case he mentions it, I am taking him to ride dirt bikes this week for the first time.

**RR:**

- Where are those expensive Nikes I bought him last week?
- Can you pay me your half of the medical bills that you owe me?

## THE OVER-COMMUNICATOR

**FYI:**

- You know I don't approve of him learning to ride dirt bikes. Remember when you were a teenager and you broke your leg doing that and had to sit out a whole season of baseball because of it? It's just not safe. In fact, I Googled the danger of dirt bike riding today and this came up:  
*The most common injuries will be a broken collar bone and a broken wrist. It's also possible that you might tear your ACL or sprain your ankle. In most cases, it will take a few weeks or months to recover from these injuries. When you're racing Motocross, your body will be under a lot of pressure.*
- If you don't believe me, just go to [dirtbikesaredangerous.com](http://dirtbikesaredangerous.com)! Johnny is very athletic and has shown promise to be a star in many different sports. He could even get a scholarship to college if he continues on the path he is on. It really irks me that you want so badly to go back to your childhood that you are willing to put your child's health at risk just to be a kid again. I mean really, you couldn't grow up for me, but these are your children and I just d...



# The Better Way

## RESPECTFUL INITIATION (day 1)

**FYI:**

- I don't know if you read the email or not, but Johnny's make-up baseball game is this Tuesday (making up for last Saturday's game). He is supposed to be at the Fun-Time Park at 5:00 for warm-up. Coach Smith has more details if you need them.
- Johnny told me he is failing math, but I haven't seen the parent report on that yet. Just thought I'd let you know in case he brings it up to you.
- I am planning to take Johnny to learn how to ride dirt bikes in the next few weeks, but I know you are nervous about that kind of thing. I'd like to talk to you first before going, so let me know when you would be available to do that.

**RR:**

- I bought Johnny a new pair of Nikes last week, but it seems he may have lost them. Would you mind looking around your house to see if they are there?
- I have attached a spreadsheet of the current medical expenses. Please let me know if you have questions.

## RESPECTFUL RESPONSE (day 2)

**ANSWER TO RR:**

- Yes, I saw them under the bed yesterday. I'll be sure to send them back.
- Thanks for the spreadsheet. I don't get paid until the 15<sup>th</sup>, so I'll get a check to you then.

**FYI:**

- Johnny did tell me about his trouble in math. I'm implementing a rule that he needs to spend 30 minutes every day on his math problems (beyond his regular homework) until he brings the grade up.

**RRs:**

- Could you send me information/link about where you are taking him for dirt bike riding? You are right – it makes me nervous, but getting more information will help. I'll give you a date in next week's email about when we can talk. Thanks for your consideration.

## RESPECTFUL RESPONSE (day 3)

**ANSWER TO RR:**

The link to the dirt bike park is [www.dirtbikingisgreat.com](http://www.dirtbikingisgreat.com). I look forward to discussing this with you.

# Neutralizing Toxic Communication

*Most of the time, co-parent conflicts can be prevented if ONE parent knows how to neutralize the other parent's emotional language. Sometimes a respectful response will bring it to a close automatically. Other times, knowing when and how to end the conversation is helpful.*

**Read the following two examples of toxic co-parent communication and discuss:**

- What each parent could have done better
- At what point in the communication the conflict could have ended
- How the parents felt about themselves when it was over
- How they felt about the other parent
- What tone is set for the next conversation/negotiation

## **EXAMPLE 1: TEXT STREAM BETWEEN DAVE AND JANET**

**Dave:** *Janet, are you going to pick up the kids today from school?*

**Janet:** *Of course, I am. Why would you ask me that?*

**Dave:** *Just couldn't remember if it was my day or yours.*

**Janet:** *Are you kidding me? How could you not know?*

**Dave:** *Never mind. Sorry I asked.*

**Janet:** *See, this is why I have custody!! What kind of dad doesn't remember if it's his day?*

**Dave:** *Really? LOL*

[5 minute pause]

**Janet:** *You think this is funny? I'm not laughing*

**Dave:** *Please. Just go get the kids so you can tell them what a horrible dad I am.*

**Janet:** *I don't have to tell them. They can figure it out pretty easily.*

**Dave:** *Did you forget to take your medication today?*

**Janet:** *Now, I'm really laughing.*

**Dave:** *Good. Maybe the kids will see you smile for a change (since I didn't our entire marriage).*

**Janet:** *Wow, Dave. Can't believe you are still angry about our marriage. Get over it.*

**Dave:** *Wish I could, but the wicked witch keeps coming back.*

**Jane:** *Please stop texting me or I will get a restraining order.*

**Dave:** *Please do since I rarely see the kids now anyway.*

**Janet:** *You would love that. Then you wouldn't HAVE to be a dad.*

**Dave:** *Stop texting me or I'll get one too.*

**Janet:** *Good. Then we won't be allowed to talk to each other anymore. Finally some peace.*

**Dave:**  [pile of poop emojis]

## **EXAMPLE #2: EMAIL EXCHANGE BETWEEN SHERYL AND ANTHONY**

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*I would like to sign up Junior for the rec-league baseball team this year. Registration is next week and I need to know if you are going to be able to take him to practices.*

**TO: Sheryl FROM: Anthony**

*Yes, I'd like him to be involved in something. But when you did this the last time, you signed him up for a league across town. That makes it really hard for us on our weekends. Can't you do it somewhere closer to me?*

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*Why do you always have to bring up the past? We only did that one season because he wanted to play with his cousin's team, and you fought me tooth and nail about that. It's not about you, Anthony. It's about Junior.*

**TO: Sheryl FROM: Anthony**

*Thanks for reminding me! Of course I know it's about him. All I did was ask that you do it differently this time. I don't want to get into a fight about it.*

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*Well, it sounds like you're looking for a fight. Since I have final say on activities, I don't even have to ask your permission to do this. I was just being courteous. I don't know why I even try.*

**TO: Sheryl FROM: Anthony**

*Where is he going to play then? What days/times are the practices and games? What's the cost? I'm tired of you just doing things without giving me a heads-up or any information. I'm his father and I should be the one getting him involved in sports. This is just wrong.*

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*Tell it to the judge. I think she's the one who gave me the rights. Deal with it. I'll send the information about the team after I get it at registration.*

**TO: Sheryl FROM: Anthony**

*Unbelievable. I'll add this to my contempt list.*

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*You do that 'cause I have some of my own.*

**TO: Sheryl FROM: Anthony**

*Really? Like what?*

**TO: Anthony FROM: Sheryl**

*I'll see you in court.*

# Case Studies: What would you do?

*Discuss with the group what you think each parent in the following scenarios should do to take care of and protect the children from co-parent conflict. There are no perfect answers, but there are better ways than others to deal with difficult situations.*

**Jennifer** recently found out that her co-parent's fiancée, who is a hairdresser, has been cutting and styling their 12-year-old daughter's hair. The last time the daughter came back from her dad's house, her hair had pink stripes in it and it was cut in a style that Jennifer would never have allowed her daughter to have.

**James** is a long-haul trucker and can only see his son two weekends per month because of his strict delivery schedule. His co-parent has asked that he give up parenting time next month because she is getting married on one of his weekends and wants their son to be there. They have been engaging in parallel parenting successfully up to this point, but James is angry that she chose one of his weekends to get married. He is considering saying no to her request because he feels it is unfair and disrespectful of his time with his son.

**Amy** has four busy children, ages 6, 9, 12 and 15. Her weekends are full of activities (baseball, soccer, piano and dance). Often on her co-parent's weekends, he drops them off at their activities, doesn't stay, and is late coming back to pick them up. On several occasions, while at his house for the weekend, the children arrive at their activities without the proper uniform or equipment. Amy knows her co-parent is not as focused on these things as she is, but she sees how it affects her kids and it angers her.

**Alex** pays his co-parent a substantial amount of child support, health insurance premiums, and the cost of extra-curricular activities per the court order, even though they share 50/50 custody. Alex is okay with this arrangement since his income is much more than his co-parent's. To save money, Alex often (but not always) packs the kids' lunches on his weeks instead of having them buy the school lunch. However, on his co-parent's weeks, she has them buy the school lunch every day and expects Alex to pay for the lunch card. The school says the children can only have one lunch card. Alex doesn't want to tell the children they can't ever buy the school lunch, but he is frustrated that his co-parent insists on taking advantage of him for every expense.

## Consider your "Plan B"

*If the other parent insists on doing the wrong thing despite your attempts to get them to do the right thing, it is important to know ahead of time what YOU will do in response so that your kids get what they need. Maybe you will have to fill in the gap for your child or go out of your way in a situation to keep them out of the conflict. Many co-parents won't do this because they don't think it is fair, especially if they have a relationship history in which they felt like a doormat or that they always gave in to the other parent. A different way to think about it is that you may have given in to the other parent when you were in relationship with him/her because you were trying to improve the relationship, which resulted in failure; but giving in after separation and divorce in order to protect your child from conflict is not giving in to the other parent or continuing to be a doormat. It's doing something that will make things easier on your child and THAT is almost always a no-fail for your kids. Think about it differently and you will likely find creative ways to disempower the negative energy of the other parent and empower yourself to move on in a healthy way!*

# FYI or RR?

**REMEMBER:** FYIs are statements that will not be answered by the other parent; RRs are questions that require an answer in order to execute the court-ordered parenting plan.

**FYI**      **RR**

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      Johnny's baseball practice will end at 5:30 on Tuesday. Do you want me to pick him up at the ballpark or at your house for our 6:00 pm exchange?

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      When I got Jenny from school on Friday, she had visited the school nurse that day because she had a headache. She seemed fine the rest of the weekend.

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      Why did you leave Johnny at your mother's for two-hours on Saturday?

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      Who is Danielle? The kids said she spent the night on Friday.

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      I have attached Johnny's soccer schedule for the fall. Please tell me which dates you will not be able to get him to the games because of your work schedule.

\_\_\_      \_\_\_      Please stop feeding our child dairy products!

**WRITE AN "FYI" OPINION STATEMENT TO YOUR CO-PARENT REGARDING A RECENT ISSUE WITH YOUR CHILD, EXPRESSING YOUR *REAL FEELINGS* (to save to your legal file):**

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**REWRITE THE ABOVE STATEMENT IN A WAY THAT WILL NEUTRALIZE AND INSPIRE YOUR CO-PARENT (to actually send to your co-parent):**

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# Appendices

## APPENDIX A: WHAT DO I SAY WHEN MY CHILD SAYS...?

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### LISTEN:

When kids share feelings, follow these steps:

1. *Affirm* that (1) you hear them; (2) you've been there; and (3) they are normal
2. *Ask* questions (logic) to gain understanding of their thinking
3. *Respond* as a parent (teaching appropriate values), not as a wounded spouse

### DECIDE:

Kids of divorce go to parents with **ALL** kinds of information about the other parent or the other parent's household. Before sharing your child's words with the other parent, determine if it's:

- *Misinformation* – clarify with the other parent if it is bothersome to you
- *Manipulation* – share with the other parent to curb manipulative power
- *Venting hurt feelings* – keep your child's confidences and simply listen

Not everything a child says should be taken as *the truth!*

### RESPOND:

- *I'm sorry that happened. Do you want to talk more about it?*
- **I would feel that way, too, if I were you.**
- *Your [mom/dad] and I see the same situation very differently. That doesn't make either of us wrong. We're just different.*
- *We don't want you to worry about who's right or wrong. It's more complicated than that.*
- *We want you to just be a kid!*
- *It's our job to keep you out of the middle of the adult conflict. If we shared with you our different positions/stories, you would feel like you had to take somebody's side, which wouldn't be fair to you.*
- *You are allowed to love us both no matter how we [mom/dad] feel about each other.*
- *I'm sorry you got put in the middle of that. **Please judge me by what you know about me, not by what you hear about me.***
- *I'm sorry your [dad/mom] disappointed you. I don't know why that happened, but I know for sure that it has nothing to do with who you are. Message: You are good. You are loved. You are loveable.*

**KIDS NEED YOU TO BE A PARENT TO TEACH THEM HOW TO BE UNDER AUTHORITY.  
KIDS NEED YOU TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM,  
TO TEACH THEM HOW TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS.**

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **AGES AND STAGES: EMOTIONAL/PRACTICAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN OF DIVORCE**

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In general, preschoolers focus on security, elementary school children get sad and angry, middle schoolers are confused and want to know what is going on, and teenagers question the validity of commitment and relationships. The following are some helpful guidelines. The unique circumstances in each family should determine the true needs.

#### **Infants (0-18 months)**

- Maintain consistency in people and routines (make changes gradually)
- Avoid angry expressions and emotional outbursts in front of the child
- Don't fight with your co-parent in front of the child
- Parenting plan: frequent day/night visits with non-custodial parent if parent/child bond exists; if not, start with short frequent visits leading into longer ones over time

#### **Toddlers (18 months-3 years)**

- *All of what Infants need, plus:*
- Lots of love -- physical affection and verbal assurances
- Provide opportunities for them to express feelings through words and play
- Give regular reassurances that the child will be cared for and that you will maintain regular contact with him/her (to help them avoid fear of abandonment)
- Parenting plan: transition into longer periods with non-custodial parent; focus on routine and begin to minimize transitions between parents

#### **Preschoolers (3-5 years)**

- *All of what Toddlers need, plus:*
- Give clear and concrete explanation of any changes that arise
- Have patience with their need to be clingy or engage in temporary regression (reverting to baby-like behaviors – thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, baby-talk, etc.)
- Provide assurance that the divorce/separation is not their fault
- Parenting plan: focus on routine and continue to minimize transitions, working around pre-school and kindergarten schedules

#### **Young School-Age (6-8 years)**

- *All of what Pre-Schoolers need, plus:*
- Actively give permission to the child to love the *other* parent through encouragement
- Avoid criticizing the other parent in front of the child
- Avoid putting the child in the middle of the co-parent conflict
- Listen well, affirm feelings, and let them know their feelings are normal
- Parenting plan: work around school schedule; shared (50/50) parenting works if parents are cooperative and their homes have similar routines, otherwise, these kids do best in one home through the school week and time with the other on long weekends

### **Older School-Age (9-12)**

- *All of what Young School-Age children need, plus:*
- Encourage the children to see the good in their other parent
- Avoid pressuring the child to take either parent's side
- Support the child's contact with the other parent, even when the child resists
- Parenting plan: work around school schedule and extra-curricular activities; shared (50/50) parenting can work if parents are cooperative and rules are similar in each home; make allowances for child's budding social time in the schedule

### **Adolescents (13-18)**

- *All of what Older School-Age children need, plus:*
- Discuss issues and situations honestly, without making the conversations about your opinions
- Allow appropriate friendship opportunities and peer activities
- Avoid reliance on adolescent children for your emotional support
- Refrain from implying your adolescent has the power to change the legal parenting plan. Changes usually require legal consideration and create family conflict that the adolescent may not realize or be emotionally prepared to endure. Tread on this subject lightly and ONLY at the prompting of your adolescent. Seek professional advice before pursuing.
- Parenting plan: shared (50/50) parenting can be difficult to accomplish with teens; work around activities, social needs, and understanding that they have a life outside of their immediate family

### **Adult Children (18+)**

- *All of what minor children need, plus:*
- Be sensitive that they continue to believe they are part of each parent and want both parents to be their best selves.
- Understand that revealing complex and negative "facts" about either parent STILL affects their feelings about themselves.
- Refrain from expecting them to take care of your emotions and be there for you when they are trying to find their own way and make their own mistakes as growing adults.
- Give them time. They may pull away from your "situation" in order to compartmentalize their feelings about it. Give them the time they need and trust that you have raised them well and they will return to that upbringing in due time and on their own terms.

### **REMEMBER:**

*In all stages, you are seed-planting. The good harvest of your parenting work comes much later when children gain, and are humbled by, real adult life experiences.*

*Wait for it. You can't rush maturity and acceptance.*





**APPENDIX C:**  
**FIVE RULES TO KEEP KIDS OUT OF THE MIDDLE OF ADULT CONFLICT**

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**Copy these and place them on your refrigerator door or other visible place and invite the children to remind you if you violate any of them. Any violation of them indicates a lack of sensitivity about what the children may be experiencing and it simply is unfair to ask them to bear the burden of your dysfunctional co-parent relationship.**

1. **Have co-parenting conversations (phone, text or email) when the kids are not around.** Even hearing one side of the conversation can be hurtful to kids.
2. **Talk to each other about co-parenting issues (scheduling, child support, major decisions, etc.), instead of sending messages through the children** (e.g. "Tell your dad I will be late picking you up on Saturday" or "Ask your mom if I can switch weekends with her next time."). Parents should work out the details of their co-parenting arrangement on their own and simply inform the kids about what is going to happen. Likewise, if a *child* makes a request to change the schedule, for instance, the best answer is "I'll talk to your mom/dad first and get back to you." The child does not need to know who said what during that conversation – only what was decided.
3. **Always clear a schedule change with the other parent before making promises to the children.** For example, don't tell the child you are planning a beach trip with them during the other parent's week unless you have cleared it first with the other parent. Otherwise, children get their hopes up and then when the other parent says, "No," they are unnecessarily angry with that parent.
4. **Never ask a child to keep a secret from the other parent.** Kids should be allowed to share information freely between their two homes. If there is something you don't want the other parent to know about your life, don't do it or say it in front of the children. Secret-keeping puts the child in an impossible situation and can cause them to feel alienated from both parents and forced to filter information or develop a habit of lying in order to stay out of trouble.
5. **Always allow the child to talk freely about the other parent or the other parent's household without judgment.** If you act like it hurts YOU to hear about their life in the other house, they will feel like they have to filter information for your benefit. **Likewise, keep your negative opinions about the other parent to yourself.** Kids ALWAYS have mixed emotions when on one hand they want to believe a parent is "good" (so they can feel good about themselves), but then have to struggle with their parents' assessments of each other. Let kids discover who their parents are all on their own, even if it hurts. Then you, as the listening parent, can simply acknowledge their hurt and assure them they are loveable no matter what they are experiencing with either parent.

## APPENDIX D: SAMPLE STRUCTURED CO-PARENT EMAIL PROTOCOL AND PROCEDURES

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### 1. INITIATOR (parents trade off being the initiator each month):

Sends an email to the other parent by *Sunday night at 9:00 pm*

The email will include **only these two sections** (with no salutation, paragraphs, closing, signature or postscripts), with bullet points underneath each section. Limit bullet points to 2-4 under each heading, if possible:

*Example:*

#### **FYI (For Your Information)**

- Johnny had a sore throat on Tuesday. I had him gargle with salt water three nights in a row and it seems better now.
- I am concerned that Johnny didn't have his weekend homework done when he returned to my house on Sunday. In my house, I make him do it on Friday after school so he doesn't have to worry about it over the weekend, so maybe that could work for you as well.

#### **RR (Requested or Required Response)**

- Do you want me to pick up Johnny's ADD medicine this week or are you going to do that?
- I can't find Johnny's next dentist appointment on my calendar. Could you please tell me again when it is so I can record it?
- Since Johnny will be going to middle school this year, the start times will be different than his old school. Do we need to do anything differently regarding drop-off or pick-up and/or child care?

**IMPORTANT:** If you have nothing to report or ask of the other parent on any of the appointed email days, still send an email saying, "None" under the FYI section and "None" under the other. This way the other parent is not wondering if you forgot to email or respond. This shows that you place a priority on the communication process and keeps the possibility of negative assumptions at bay.

### 2. RESPONDER

Responds to Initiator's email by *Monday night at 9:00 pm*

This email will include **only these three sections** (with no salutation, paragraphs, closing, signature or postscripts), with bullet points underneath each section. Limit bullet points to 2-4 under each heading, if possible:

Example:

**Answers to your RRs**

- I will pick up his medicine. Thanks for offering.
- Dentist appointment is October 5<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 pm
- School begins at 8:00 and ends at 3:45. I plan to drop him off at school at 7:30 am and the bus will take him to After School Karate like last year, and I will pick him up there at 6:00 pm. Let me know your plan.

**FYI**

- I would like to take Johnny to our family reunion over Labor Day weekend, but Labor Day is your day this year. Let me know if you can accommodate.

**RR**

- Did Johnny leave his basketball shoes at your house last weekend? We can't find them anywhere. They could be at his friend, Todd's. If you don't have them we'll call Todd's mother.

**3. INITIATOR**

Sends email to Responder by *Tuesday night at 9:00 pm*

The email will include only **one section** (with no salutation, paragraphs, closing, signature or postscripts), with bullet points underneath each section. Limit bullet points to 2-4 under each heading, if possible:

**Answers to your RRs**

- Yes, we found them in the basement. I will bring them by your house on Thursday so he will have them for his Friday game.

**TO AVOID CONFLICT:**


- Watch your tone (pretend as if you are writing a letter to your boss and you want to make a good impression)
- Assume your child will read what you write (make him/her proud)
- Give enough information to avoid the other parent making assumptions
- Don't give too much information or the other parent won't read it in full and will likely misinterpret or misunderstand what you are saying.
- Don't scold or bring up the past. It's totally unproductive.
- Don't just complain. Offer suggestions in order to negotiate a solution.
- Fake respect even though you don't feel it. This should be a lifetime goal.

## STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION TIPS:

**FYI statements are reserved for (1) items the other parent might want to know in order to effectively do their parenting with the child; (2) opinion statements (always start with “I am concerned” and leave out judgmental words or bringing up the past); (3) requests for schedule changes.** REMEMBER: always stick to the court-ordered parenting plan and don’t assume the other parent will accommodate your schedule change requests. Therefore, have your plan B in place in case the other parent does not respond. **No response means NO**, however, a simple response, “I’m not able to accommodate your change request,” is better.

**RR questions should be limited to ONLY those that must be answered in order for you to execute your portion of the parenting plan.** Before placing them in this section, ask yourself, do I need to ask this question in order to do my parenting this week or in the near future? If the answer is no, don’t place it in the RR section, but make it a statement in the FYI section instead. For instance, it wouldn’t be appropriate to ask, “Why did you feed Johnny McDonalds three times on Saturday?” in the RR section. That is a veiled criticism. Instead, say, “I am concerned that Johnny said he ate McDonalds three times on Saturday. He ended up with a stomach ache.”

**Neither parent is required to respond to anything in the FYI section.** However, you can if you can keep it respectful or if it seems in the best interests of the child to do so. For instance, you might use the FYI section to share information a child says if it will promote honesty/integrity in your child. If one parent shared a concern that Johnny said he got in trouble at school for putting gum in a student’s hair, the other parent might answer, “That’s interesting. He told me that he got in trouble because he was WITH the kid who put the gum in her hair. Sounds like Johnny is fibbing to one of us. We should both talk to him about that.” If it seems that a child is manipulating or the information doesn’t match what you’ve been told, it may be helpful to respond to the FYI so the child knows he can’t play one parent against the other. On the other hand, if a child shares a heartfelt concern or painful experience about the other parent, it’s best *not* share it in an FYI because the child may feel betrayed if you do (and you cannot know how the other parent will react to the child if you tell). Try to find a balance between what needs to be shared and protecting confidences with your child.



**TO DOWNLOAD A COURT ORDER FOR THIS  
EMAIL COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL,  
VISIT OUR WEB SITE:**

**[www.cnfc.org/help-with-divorce-and-co-parenting/](http://www.cnfc.org/help-with-divorce-and-co-parenting/)**

## **APPENDIX E: PARENTAL ALIENATION**

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Many parents engage in the marginalization of their co-parent, especially at first when emotions are high and a court case is pending. However, most parents who unknowingly or unintentionally marginalize their co-parent's role at first, eventually get past their anger and realize the importance of the other parent in their child's life, even if that parent is not the most reliable, dependable, consistent or healthy role model for their children. Kids deserve to know both of their parents, warts and all, so that they can learn about themselves and how to navigate relationships of all types in their world. Parents who do not stop marginalizing, but engage in consistent or increasing behaviors to interfere with their child's feelings about the other parent are often defined as "parental alienators." Parental alienation is not recognized as a mental health disorder by the DSM-V, however, parents who engage in these destructive behaviors often have one of many diagnosable conditions that could benefit from treatment. Parental alienation is not only destructive to a child's relationship with the other parent, but causes the child to have extremely distorted expectations and views of most relationships throughout life. Therefore, it is worth understanding and preventing, if possible.

### **Actions/Behaviors of the Alienating Parent:**

- Giving children choices when they have no choice about visits with the other parent.
- Telling the child everything about the marital relationship or reasons for the divorce (in the name of honesty), with the goal of turning the child against the other parent.
- Refusing to allow the child to transport special belongings to the other parent's house.
- Misinforming the other parent about events (reporting the wrong day or time) to keep them from attending, but then telling the child the other parent doesn't care enough to show up.
- Doing or saying anything to the child that implies he/she should take one parent's side over the other.
- Sending the message to the child that ALL of the other parent's extended family are bad, or are guilty by association, in order to keep the child from having any bonds with the other parent's side of the family.
- Requiring the child to be on speaker when talking to the other parent on the phone.
- Keeping the child on the phone (verbal or texting) while at the other parent's home, asking for a play-by-play of what is going on, and implying or supporting that the child is somehow in danger while under the care of the other parent.
- Exaggerating the other parent's mistakes to cause the child to conclude that the other parent is not fit to take care of him/her. For example, saying that a parent is bad because he/she forgot an appointment, fed the child an unhealthy meal, or kept them out too late. This sends the message that a parent must be flawless to be fit.
- Taking steps to change the child's last name (if it matches the other parent's) or suggesting to the child that he/she should be adopted by a step-parent instead of seeing the biological parent.

### **A child who has experienced parental alienation (and may have *Parental Alienation Syndrome*):**

- Cannot remember any good memories (prior to the separation or divorce) with their other parent. When shown photos of good times, the child may say he/she was faking it for the camera.
- Cannot give any valid reasons for being angry toward a parent or their reasons seem disproportionate to their level of anger. They rarely can give details about their reasons and when they do, they often sound rehearsed, as if coached by an adult.
- Expresses similar anger toward the other parent's extended family and there is not one person in that family who they like or is worthy of anything good to say.
- Are only loyal to one parent and cannot express why they are disloyal to the other parent. Children normally want to please and/or be loyal to both parents. Expressing disloyalty without an extreme cause is suspicious.
- Uncharacteristically acts out while with the other parent in order to be able to report to the alienating parent that it was a bad time. They do this for two reasons: (1) because it pleases the alienating parent to hear it; and (2) because they do not have to lie to that parent – they make it a bad time so they can truthfully report a bad time.
- Threatens to call the police if the other parent becomes confrontational in any way, which results in the child being in control. The child feels it is only a matter of time before the alienated parent will need to discipline, and once the police are called, the so-called "bad" parent will get in trouble and the child will not have to see him/her again.
- Makes false accusations of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, when all else fails. This is the ultimate symptom and requires legal and mental health intervention, throwing the child into an unexpected tailspin of anger, hurt and distress.
- Experiences extreme trust issues, distorted relationship expectations and unnecessary anxiety and depression, among other possible symptoms that will affect them long term.

### **PREVENTING & RESPONDING TO ALIENATION:**

#### **If you are being alienated:**

- Point out and report marginalizing behaviors to your attorney or a judge before they turn into alienation. Research tells us that the sooner alienation is identified and treated, chances are better for a successful parent/child relationship.
- Stay consistent with the parenting schedule and don't break promises to the children. That will just give them more reasons to be angry at you.
- Be patient. Alienation is not the child's fault. Getting angry at the child for what you think is irrational anger toward you will not set a good example, nor will it help your cause. Speak to a counselor who is experienced in parental alienation and who can help you respond appropriately to this complex circumstance.
- Understand no matter what you do, you will be criticized, so don't defend or try too hard to please your child. Let the child know you understand how difficult this must be for him to navigate and then proceed to be the best parent you can be.

#### **If you notice you are engaging in any of the above alienating behaviors:**

- Stop them immediately! If you believe the other parent is harmful to your child, take your grievances to the court or your local county's child protective agency. Also, seek counseling so that you can let go of your fears and allow your child the relationship with both parents that he/she deserves.

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