



Shared Parenting Overview & Considerations

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This information does not replace counseling, serve as parent coordination or parent facilitation, or constitute legal advice. As a counselor working with high-conflict divorce and custody concerns, along with co-parenting needs, I do not conduct custody evaluations or make custody/visitation recommendations under any circumstance.

Divorces are difficult. There is no way around the challenges, difficulty, stress, and concerns a divorce may bring. However, there are choices we can make to help ease the stress of divorce and navigating custody/visitation arrangements. The biggest priority during divorce must be the children and learning how to successfully co-parent. I recognize this is difficult as wounds and baggage from the divorce and ending a relationship may cloud our judgment. It is during these times we run the risk of losing sight of the most important aspect of the family dynamic, separating our feelings about our former spouse from the priority of learning how to co-parent. It's important to remember this: You and your partner are divorced (or getting there), no one divorced the children.

It's never too late to choose to successfully co-parent. I know you may be thinking "yeah, but you don't know my former partner" or "this is impossible!" Yes. I understand it may feel that way. There are several unique personalities that may make co-parenting more challenging. However, in my experience, refusal to engage in successful co-parenting is often refusal to accept that things may or may not have happened in the past, yet the path forward is one of a clean slate with a focus on both parents' commitment to the children and the co-parenting process.

I ask all parents to prioritize your children by committing to the co-parenting process. Should you continue to struggle with wounds from the marriage or partnership in a way that interferes with your ability to co-parent, please consider individual counseling. I am happy to provide referrals.

What is a High-Conflict Divorce?

A high-conflict divorce or custody situation is characterized by persistent lack of trust, increased anger, and a commitment to litigation (Elrod, 2001). The litigation process may already be in motion for you, but that does not mean that you cannot also commit to successful co-parenting and reducing the impacts on your children (see below). The continuation of high-conflict interactions is likely to include fear-driven behaviors, blame and attacks of the other parent, resistance to cooperate or co-parent, false allegations of abuse (see below), or worse, sabotaging the parent-child relationship (Johnston, 2000). These are just some of the unintended consequences of high-conflict dynamics. Parents in a high-conflict divorce (or custody situation) "often evaluate their decisions from a place of anger, jealousy, and self-centeredness" (Joyce, 2016, p. 643). I know that may be difficult to read, accept, or admit. It's important to remind yourself that you are human, and pain is real. It's never too late to increase your awareness around these potential behaviors and put a stop to them. The time is NOW!

Possible Outcomes of Unsuccessful Co-Parenting & High Conflict Divorce

- Anxiety, defensiveness across family system (Joyce, 2016)



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- Reduces parenting competence, clouds view of best interest of the children (Johnston, 2000)
- Impacts the following for children (Dreman, 2000):
 - Coping skills and strategies
 - Life adjustment
 - Impacts academic performance, self-esteem, mental health
 - May increase delinquent behaviors, substance use or abuse, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and suicidal ideations.

High-conflict dynamics may result in impairment or distress in all life domains for your child: social, academic, psychological, emotional, cognitive, or relational. Further, the impacts may last well beyond the resolution. This may be alarming to read. I encourage you to pay attention to your reaction to reading these possible outcomes as they have been well-researched. Perhaps you are defensive and believe this won't happen to your child or maybe you read those and immediately blamed the other parent. Regardless of your reaction and your thoughts around the above bullet points, I will remind you that you can choose to begin again today, find a way for a path forward with successful co-parenting.

Child Abuse and Complaints

As you read above, there are times when individuals make false allegations of abuse. People may do this as a part of legal strategy, a belief that abuse reports will have the child removed from the other parents, an attempt to gain a protective order, or maybe they believe abuse is occurring. Sometimes, individuals also use the guardian ad litem to excessively "tattle" on the other parent to make them look like an unfit or uncooperative parent. Many professionals can see through this tactic. Some examples of this may include:

- Nitpicking the other parent's parenting approach
- Reporting things the other parent did or didn't do during their parenting time (i.e., not getting the child their favorite meal, taking their cell phone away, not spending enough time with them, etc.) **These need to be understood within a context, in particular patterns of behavior, whether there are safety concerns, and what is the child's purpose in sharing this information with you (more on that later)?!
- Complaining about the other parents' new partner (without safety concerns). This should be addressed with co-parenting expectations.
- Blaming your child's response to the divorce or developmentally appropriate behaviors on the other parent. Sometimes....kids are just being kids.

You can follow this link <https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/training/reporting/recognizing.asp> to learn more about abuse and neglect. **PLEASE DO NOT FILE FALSE ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE.** Your children may be aware (depending on age) of whether they are being abused. If you file a false report that is then investigated, your child will know you filed a false report. This is a quick way to interrupt the relationship you have with your child.

Finally, children often parrot what they hear adults say. This is fairly obvious to many mental health professionals. This becomes an issue when your child is asked to give examples of reported abuse or dissatisfaction with the other parent....they will struggle with this, because they want to be honest even if their parent hasn't been. I encourage you to strongly consider the ramifications of making false allegations.



This section does not suggest abuse does not occur. I respect and honor the process and the difficult experience for families when abuse does occur. This section is related to false allegations as legal strategy and not meant to dismiss or minimize abusive interactions. Please **DO report actual or suspected abuse or neglect.*

Working to Understand Your Child in the Process: Confusion, Power & Control, Alliances, and the Blame Game!

Your child likely had little to no control over your divorce and this is appropriate. However, human beings, even little human beings, crave power and control. When we feel we do not have control over something we wish we could control, we lash out and find other ways of gaining control. I believe that children experiencing high-conflict divorce or custody battles experience a heightened need to control something related to the situation. One of the first places they go to seek this autonomy is mounting a case of blame on one parent. This looks different for different children and families. Some children believe one parent is to blame for “ruining” the family, maybe one parent is just “crazy,” or perhaps they feel sorry for one parent (particularly if the other parent is already dating). Regardless of their internal process, I have found that most children believe they need to pick a side in the divorce. This may create a serious issue for co-parenting and for the other parent, especially if one parent is perpetuating this alliance. ***Remember: parents don’t “get” a child in the divorce. Even if the custody arrangement is provides more time with one parent, the other parent is still a parent.***

I have also found that many children are not upset at all about the divorce. In fact, most children I have worked with are in support of the divorce. The primary issue is **HOW** the parents are behaving and treating one another during the divorce. Further, children are more concerned with being caught in the crossfire and many are aware enough to see that much of the dynamics of the high-conflict divorce have nothing to do with them. You can overcome this by committing to co-parenting, working through your emotional process with a mental health professional, and prioritizing your children.

References

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- Joyce, A. N. (2016). High-conflict divorce: A form of child neglect. *Family Court Review*, 54(4), 642-656.

Do THIS not THAT: Unified Fronts, Communication, and Shared Decision Making

Presenting as a unified front is an essential aspect of co-parenting. Whether you express dissatisfaction about the other parent (you shouldn't ever make disparaging remarks) or not, your children are able to detect fractures in the co-parenting process. This may cause confusion, further create divides, or give ammunition to your child if they are "playing both sides against the middle." In my experience, successful co-parenting requires shared parenting decisions and open communication. I suggest a group text thread with the child so that parents may communicate decisions as a team. If texting is not the preferred method of communication, calling your child on speaker phone with the other parent present to discuss discipline or parenting decisions is another way to demonstrate a united front to your child. Further, this will help reduce triangulation or manipulation where a child or parent intentionally or unintentionally twists words, behaviors, or experiences with the other parent or sibling. This really disrupts the family system. I should caution you that this may be more difficult than it seems, particularly if the child has formed an alliance with one parent. The parent who is in the good graces of the child may feel that the parent-child relationship will be threatened if the communication is more clear, direct, and unified across parenting roles.

DON'T DO THIS.....

- Don't discuss custody, divorce, litigation with children. Don't blame them or attempt to leverage them for legal strategy. This is confusing and may cause resentment.
 - ***But what if my child asks about these things?*** It's okay to comfort them, meet them with compassion, and let them know you understand that the process is difficult. It's also okay to let them know you aren't supposed to discuss the topic.
- Don't make disparaging comments about the other parent (or their partner). Don't make passive aggressive comments in what you think may be a subtle way...kids are smart and can pick up on this.
 - ***But what if my child also makes these comments?*** What would you do if your child made these comments about your current partner or the other parent when you all were still together.....this is a teachable moment and an opportunity to remind your child that this is not appropriate and it won't be tolerated.
- Don't share private adult details with children. There are certain things that just aren't a child's business. This is most common when parents choose to share reasons or details of what led up to the divorce with children. ***Please consider the impact this may have on your child and/or the parent-child relationship.*** Are you sharing about the other parent's infidelity, that they used substances as a teenager or drank too much at Aunt Barbara's wedding in 1995, that they are lying about smoking cigarettes, that they used to have a temper and break things, or that they didn't carry their weight financially (examples, but not limited to these!) because it is in the best interest of the child or because their safety is at risk if they remain unaware of these intimate details? OR are these details shared out of anger, pain, or perhaps....an attempt to gain favor with your child and turn them against the other parent?


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- ***But what if my child asks about these things?*** It's completely okay to tell your child that it's not an appropriate conversation to have. You may also consider referring them to the other parent and letting the other parent know that they asked about these topics.
- Don't attempt to use a mental health professional as a part of your legal strategy. Don't encourage your child to parrot or share **YOUR** narrative about the divorce or custody preferences. Mental health professionals can often tell when a child is speaking like an adult or using the sentence structures of an adult. This will only complicate the case and more importantly, interferes with the therapeutic benefit of your child's counseling.
- Don't tell your children that their counselor or therapist has already told them everything they say in session. This is rarely the case, and it may have lasting consequences on your child's ability to trust a mental health professional throughout their lives.
- Don't undermine the other parent or make one parent the "good parent" and the other parent the "bad parent". In other words, one parent should not always be the one saying yes and the other should not always be the one saying no.
- Don't leverage financial ability or ability to purchase more toys or activities than the other parent in a way that makes you the "better" parent. Financial ability for extras doesn't make one parent better than another. Although, children may become confused by this.
- Don't name call, attack, or make accusations. Try to pause before engaging in a tension filled conversations. Ask yourself if your comments are working towards a solution or the common goal of supporting your child OR if they are from a place of pain and anger.

DO THIS!

- Prioritize your child through the co-parenting process and a commitment to shared parenting.
- Support, encourage, and promote a healthy parent-child relationship with the other parent. You can do this by communicating to your child that you support the relationship and respect the role of the other parent as a valuable and important person in their life. Unfortunately, children often feel compelled to "pick a side" in the divorce. Each parent has the responsibility to ensure the child does not believe they need to pick a side.
- Communicate with the other parent about important topics. Some topics may include, but are not limited to: academics, behavioral concerns, discipline needs, medical needs, medical appointments, or important events. I know, I know, the other parent can access this information themselves by contacting the doctor or the school....shared communication is important. Consider the risks of sharing this information more freely.... Are you not sharing this information because of a personal vendetta or a personal wound? Or are you not sharing this information because it may cause true harm to your child? Unless you have an order,

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stating the other parent cannot become aware of certain topics, then what is really holding you back and are you considering the best interest of your child? Are you withholding information as a source of power and control? Are you withholding information to prove that the other parent doesn't care? Again, what is in the best interest of your child? **Individual counseling may help you work through some of your own process around this**

- Send pictures or share brief updates about positive interactions/events with your child during your parenting time. This does not need to be excessive or all the time. However, I'm sure there are things the other parent would enjoy knowing about your shared child when they are not with them.
- Determine co-parenting goals and expectations. Some things to consider may be: what constitutes a big decision that would require both parents' input, what constitutes an emergency in which the other parent should be contacted, how will step-parent or committed partner roles be coordinated (this can be very confusing for children), discuss discipline approaches and differences.
- Use Active Listening skills and Fair Rules for Fighting when interacting with the other parent or your child.
- Take a break from communication when need be. This is okay. It's healthier than adding fuel to the fire. If you are communicating via email, text, or Our Family Wizard, consider typing out a draft and then waiting several hours and re-reading it before sending it.

***See Fair Rules for Fighting on the next page

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Fighting Fair to Resolve Conflict

What Kind of “Fighter” Are You?

- Do you avoid conflict at all costs?
- Do you feel that any criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Do you hit “below the belt” and later regret it?
- Do you feel “out of control” when faced with a conflict?
- Do you become withdrawn and silent when you are angry?
- Do you hang on to complaints from the past?

Conflict Styles

Sometimes people never learn to handle anger appropriately. In this case, they may develop an unhealthy style of conflict, such as:

- ◇ **“Mad Bomber”**
Gets angry and has no trouble expressing it, but

In most relationships, conflict is inevitable, and for many of us, conflict can cause some discomfort. If handled appropriately, however, conflict can actually strengthen relationships and improve our understanding of each other. When handled poorly, conflict can cause broken friendships, ended relationships, and long-simmering feuds.

What Causes Conflict?

Conflict can occur whenever two or more people - whether close friends, family members, co-workers, or romantic partners - disagree about their perceptions, desires, ideas, or values. These differences can range from the trivial, such as who last took out the garbage, to more significant disagreements which strike at the heart of our most fundamental beliefs and concerns. Regardless of the substance of the disagreement, though, conflict can, and often does, arouse strong feelings.



Conflict and Anger



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Disagreements can leave people feeling angry or hurt. For many people, feeling hurt puts them in a position of vulnerability. People generally feel less in control when they are hurt, and they may move into feeling angry as a way of feeling less vulnerable or more "powerful." Feeling angry isn't necessarily a problem if it is handled constructively; however, problems with anger are often worsened by common beliefs that are not necessarily true. Parental messages can plant the idea that being angry is the same as being out of control or acting childish. Some people may also have the idea that anger equals aggression, but the truth is that anger is a normal human emotion, just as normal - and healthy - as happiness and sadness.

Basic Guidelines for Fair Fighting

Fair fighting is a way to manage conflict and associated feelings effectively. To fight fairly, you just need to follow some basic guidelines to help keep your disagreements from becoming entrenched or destructive. This may be difficult when you think the other person's point of view is silly, irrational, or just plain unfair. But remember, he or she may think the same thing about your ideas.



- ◆ **Remain calm.** Try not to overreact to difficult situations. Others will be more likely to consider your viewpoint if you express your opinions calmly and respectfully.
- ◆ **Express feelings in words, not actions.** Telling someone directly and honestly how you feel can be a very powerful form of communication. If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a "time out" and do something to help yourself regroup - take a walk, do some deep breathing, play with the dog, do the dishes - whatever works for you. Remember to set a time that same day when the two of you can meet again to discuss the issue without the conversation becoming emotionally volatile.
- ◆ **Be specific about what is bothering you.** Vague complaints are hard to work on. The more specific, the better.
- ◆ **Deal with only one issue at a time.** Don't introduce other topics until each is fully discussed. This avoids the "kitchen sink" effect where people throw in all their complaints without really resolving anything.
- ◆ **No "hitting below the belt."** Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger, and vulnerability.
- ◆ **Avoid accusations.** Accusations will cause others to get defensive. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.
- ◆ **Don't generalize.** Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and can make an already tense situation even worse.
- ◆ **Don't exaggerate.** Exaggerating or inventing a complaint - or your feelings about it - will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with facts and your honest feelings.
- ◆ **Don't stockpile.** Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time can be counterproductive. It's almost impossible to deal with numerous old problems for which interpretations may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.
- ◆ **Avoid clamming up.** When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication.

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- ◆ **Establish common ground rules.** You may even want to ask your partner-in-conflict to read and discuss the information in this handout with you. When parties accept positive common ground rules for managing a conflict, resolution becomes much more likely.

Ten Steps to Fair Fighting

The following are ten steps to use in order to make the fair fighting ground rules effective:

1. Before you begin, ask yourself, "What specifically is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue?"
2. Know what your goals are before you begin. Ask yourself, "What are the possible outcomes that I would consider acceptable?"
3. Remember that the idea is not to "win" but to come to a mutually satisfying and peaceful solution to the problem.
4. Set a time for a discussion with your partner-in-conflict. It should be as soon as possible but agreeable to both of you. Springing something when the other person is unprepared may leave him or her feeling the need to fend off an attack. If you encounter resistance to setting a time, try to help the other person see that the problem is important to you.
5. State the problem clearly and try to stick to the facts. Once you've stated the facts, state your feelings. Use "I" messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt, or disappointment. Avoid "you" messages such as "You make me angry...."
6. Invite your partner-in-conflict to share his or her point of view, and use active listening skills. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear out his or her concerns and feelings. Try to restate what you've heard in a way that lets your partner know you have fully understood, and ask him or her to do the same for you.
7. Try to take the other's perspective - That is, try to see the problem through his or her eyes. The "opposing" viewpoint can sometimes make sense even if you don't agree.
8. Propose specific solutions and invite the other person to do the same.
9. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.
10. Be ready to compromise. Allowing the other person only one course of action will most likely hinder resolution.

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proposal for change, celebrate! Set a trial period to see how the proposed change works out, then discuss the possibility of modifying or continuing the change. If no solution to the original problem has been reached, schedule a time to begin the discussion again.

Remember that the idea is not to “win” but to reach a peaceful solution to the problem.



If Nothing Seems to Work...

Sometimes despite our best fair-fighting efforts, a disagreement or conflict can seem almost impossible to resolve. When this occurs, talking with a trained professional may help. A trained mediator can help you communicate more effectively and work your way through to a solution. Alternatively, an Employee Assistance Program professional counselor can provide short-term counseling for individuals and couples who have difficulty managing conflict, as well as counseling about other concerns you might have.

Remember that conflict is a normal, inevitable, and even healthy aspect of most relationships. When managed well, it can be used to enhance and strengthen relationships with friends, family members, co-workers, and romantic partners. Fair fighting provides the tools and techniques to help you achieve positive results when problems arise.

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