

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH THE TRANSITION OF DIVORCE

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In divorce cases, children are hurt more by the conflict that happens between parents than by the separation itself. Conflict can result in the children blaming themselves, fearing abandonment, feeling pressure to choose sides, and becoming emotional messengers between parents. The resulting blame and fear can lead to children losing their sense of safety, stability, and emotional well-being, which can manifest itself in anxiety and depression, behavioral problems, academic decline, sleep disturbances, and long-term trust and relationship difficulties.

It's easy to get trapped in the adversarial mindset. There are emotional drivers such as: hurt, betrayal, fear, desire for control, and the need for validation. The adversarial system can intensify the conflict with legal battles, financial disputes, custody competition, and the social pressure to fight. In addition, children may become symbolic battlegrounds by using access as weapons and seeking loyalty from the children.

Divorce is stressful and some conflict is expected for the reasons just enumerated. The goal isn't a perfect co-parenting relationship; it's a functional one where conflict is minimized, communication is manageable, and the child is free to maintain a healthy relationship with both parents without feeling tension pulling at them. The conflict needs to be contained, predictable, and handled with intention.

So how is a productive co-parenting relationship achieved? It is achieved by shifting the focus from beating the other parent in court to the emotional safety of the children. Children will remember whether their parents respected them emotionally and how conflict was handled throughout the process and the co-parenting to come.

Conflict is rarely caused by one incident, rather it is caused by unclear or undiscussed expectations. Proactive communication can create the stability and predictability that will lower stress for both parents and children. There are 5 conversations all co-parents should have in order to be proactive and reduce conflict:

- How the co-parents will communicate
- What values and rules matter most
- How the co-parents will handle schedules and flexibility
- How the co-parents will handle money and shared responsibilities
- What happens when the co-parents disagree

The first conversation is about how co-parents will communicate. Discuss preferred methods of communication, such as by text, by e-mail, by parenting apps, etc.. Set expectations for tone and timing to include respectful language and response windows. Communicate like business partners, i.e. clear, calm, and brief. Keep the focus on the child, i.e. what will make them feel more secure and what they might be struggling with right now.

The second conversation is what values and rules matter most. Discuss parenting priorities such as: bedtimes, homework, screen time, discipline, and religion or cultural traditions. Identify the non-negotiables like safety, respect, education, and health expectations. Throughout this conversation, accept that homes may differ.

The third conversation is how schedules and flexibility are handled. Clarifying logistics like pickups and drop-offs, holidays, vacations, and extracurricular activities is important. Along with routines, discuss what happens when plans change and how much notice is expected. Major life transitions such as new jobs, relocations, new relationships, and children's changing developmental needs should be discussed as well.

The fourth conversation is how money and shared responsibility are handled. Address financial expectations directly, such as school expenses, medical costs, sports/activities, as well as technology and clothing. Shared apps, documentation, and budget agreements can create systems and reduce emotions. Avoid common resentment triggers such as unequal contributions.

The fifth and final conversation is what to do when there is disagreement. Realize that not all disagreement can be avoided and that children actually learn emotional regulation from watching adults. Create a conflict plan with cooling-off periods, neutral third-party support, and rules for difficult conversations. Agree on what not to do such as: no arguing through the child, no public conflict, and no using parenting time as punishment.

Successful co-parenting is not about agreeing on everything, rather it is about building systems that protect the child from unnecessary conflict. Proactive communication puts the child at the center, separates adult issues from parenting issues, respects the other parent's role, as well as creates consistency and stability. Productive co-parenting teaches children respect, emotional regulation, cooperation, and resilience, which strengthens familial relationships and will suit them well for any future relationships that they have.