

THE CENTER FOR DIVORCE EDUCATION'S  
**CHILDREN IN BETWEEN®**

# HIGH CONFLICT SOLUTIONS



A parenting program for divorcing/separating parents.  
For parents faced with high-conflict and anger management situations.

## **PARENTS' GUIDE**

2nd Edition

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## ABOUT CDE

The Center for Divorce Education's goals are to educate the public, judges, and legislators on the effects of divorce on the emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. This education is accomplished through publications, workshops, online programs, and visual media to provide the most promising information for families in transition.

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*CDE's Children in Between: High Conflict Solutions Parents' Guidebook*  
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**HIGH CONFLICT  
SOLUTIONS**

## Introduction

This guidebook accompanies CDE's *Children in Between: High Conflict Solutions*. This program covers common situations in which children are put in the middle of their parents' conflicts. It makes parents aware of these situations and the effects of their behavior on children. It illustrates effective and ineffective methods parents use to deal with conflict.

This guidebook will help you build on your awareness and practice skills depicted in the program. The exercises will make it easier for you to apply these skills with your ex-partner and children. We highly recommend that you complete the exercises and ask your children to complete them, either on their own or with you, if they are old enough to do so.

## The Causes of Conflict

Separation and divorce are among life's most difficult and stressful events. A relationship that you thought would last forever has gone sour. There is much disappointment. And there is often much anger, bitterness, and conflict — before, during, and after the break-up.

It is not unusual for both parents to want to blame the other for the failure of the relationship. After all, isn't it easier to believe that we are the good guys, and that the other parents are the bad guys? Sure, it is. But in reality, couples are a system. That means that situations are rarely the fault of just one side. Both play a role. One parent's anger and disappointments and failings lead to the other parent's reactions. And that parent's reactions, in turn, feed into the first parent's anger, disappointments, and failings. And so on. And so on.

Much like ethnic groups or governments that have long histories of disagreement and conflict, it is difficult to determine who is ultimately responsible for the problem. And deciding on blame — if we could — wouldn't solve the problem, anyway. What is needed now is a search for a solution. Solutions require that we look ahead to the future, regardless of what has happened in the past. It is only the future that we can control. The past is behind us and cannot be changed. Letting go is tough work but necessary for our own maturity and happiness.

Life currently is in turmoil. You are angry. And perhaps rightly so. The other parent is just as angry. And perhaps just as rightly so.

You are also likely to be disappointed with the other parent, and disappointed with life in general. You are likely to be depressed. You are likely to feel overwhelmed by the situation, and may be very worried about your future and your children's future. It is safe to say that right now you are probably not at your best in terms of your emotional strength. And yet this is a situation that calls for your utmost emotional strength.

You have two households now. Your children cannot live in both homes. And, if the truth be told, you might be just as happy if they never saw their other parent again. That is your anger speaking. But experts agree, and the research shows overwhelmingly, that children are generally better off if they have frequent and predictable time with BOTH parents. And it is the welfare of your children that you need to think about first. Your own welfare is important, too, but ultimately it takes second place. You are an adult, and you have skills and resources. Your children are pretty much defenseless, and they need the best that both parents have to offer. So, you need to work out a parenting plan that meets both the needs of your children and you. This is often challenging, especially at first. Tensions can run high. Resentments can run deep. The desire for revenge can control you and the other parent.

Access to your children can be used as a weapon. This is stressful for both parents (though mostly for the one who is denied access), and it is very harmful for the kids. You need to find a safe, non-conflictful way to provide the children with access to you both.

Money is often a problem. There is rarely enough to go around. It, too, can be used as a weapon, to try to control the other parent. Parents who are unable to have access to their children may resort to withholding child support payments in an attempt to force access, or to punish the other parent for denying access. This is not a good idea. The purpose of child support is to support your children. Denying this responsibility hurts them, and they are not the targets of your anger.

New partners can be seen as a threat to your role as a parent to your children. They can be double threatening if you haven't yet let go of your emotional ties to the other parent. It may seem unfair and unreasonable that the other parent has found a new partner, and that you may have to accept this person as a substitute parent for your children. But this is the reality of broken relationships — new ones often arise to take their place. Your children will adjust best to their new future if you are supportive of their situation and create no additional problems for them to deal with. We hope that this program will help you to recognize the roots of your anger, and help you find some ways to get beyond it. This will take some work on your part.



Let's begin by looking at some basics. What is conflict? When is it too much?

### CONFLICT BEHAVIORS: Mild to Severe

1. Using threatening words or “put downs”
2. Arguments, interference in access to children and/or other's life
3. Aggression through legal action
4. Threats, stalking
5. Property damage
6. Physical violence, murder

## **The Nature of Conflict**

Every relationship has conflict. And every person in a relationship at one time or another contributes to the conflict. But mature and reasonable people keep control of their conflicts. They learn to manage it, and they do not let it destroy their relationship. Neither do they let it harm their children.

The lowest level of conflict is the use of threatening words or ‘put downs’ of the other person. This is pretty common. It includes calling people names or using insulting language (designed to hurt one's feelings) or threatening to cause the other person emotional or economic harm.

More severe are persistent arguments — the ones that just won't go away. These stem from an overactive amygdala, the part of our reptilian brain that causes fight or flight. These arguments continue because one or both parties lack either the skill or the willingness to find a workable solution, and because they don't know how to calm their amygdalas. Included here is interference with the other person's parental rights, or the other person's new life. Denying access to the children is hurtful (to both parent and child). Trying to interfere with your former partner's new relationship is hurtful, also.

Next in seriousness is aggressively using the court system to punish the other person. This involves repeatedly going back to court, over the same issues, or new issues. The battle rages on, with the “loser” always wanting another chance. This may include trying to outspend the other person, or just trying to wear them down. Going to court is appropriate when there are issues of need and justice that can only be resolved there. It is inappropriate when the primary purpose is to control or hurt the other party.

Then comes threats of physical harm and/or stalking. Making real threats of harm is a clear sign that you have lost control of both the situation and yourself. Similarly, stalking someone indicates that you are obsessed with what you have lost with that person, and that you are not living your own life. A healthy, mature adult knows where the boundaries are between his or her life and the life of the person from whom one is now separated. Following others to spy on them, or to make them feel uncomfortable is both selfish and a sign of personal weakness.

Close to the top of the list in terms of severity is actually damaging the property of the other person. This is both inappropriate and illegal. And it no doubt would terrorize the children, who will no longer feel safe (from others or from you).

And finally, there is actual physical violence, and sometimes murder. This is clearly a sign of rage out of control. Many high conflict family breakups involve domestic violence, including attempts to control the other parent.

## **How Common is Conflict in Separating Couples?**

Most divorces and separations have at least some conflict. Most couples manage to work through their problems and can end their relationship on reasonably good terms without much help from the court or outside agencies.

But about 10-20% of break-ups are considered high conflict cases and require court intervention. If you are in this group, you have some hard work ahead of you in order to minimize the harm to your own life, the other parent's life, and, most importantly, the lives of your children.

### **COSTS OF CONFLICT TO YOU**

- attorneys, mediators, evaluators
- therapists, counselors
- time lost from work (e.g., hearings)
- day care
- supervised visitation
- drug/alcohol monitoring
- lowered functioning: concentration problems, depression, anxiety, and strain on new relationships

## **Why is Conflict So Undesirable?**

Why are high levels of conflict undesirable? There are lots of reasons. First, there are costs to you, the parents. You will pay more, and spend more of your time with attorneys, mediators, custody evaluators, therapists, and counselors. You may lose time from work. You may need to spend more money for day care while you are meeting with attorneys, going to court, seeing court-ordered therapists, parenting coordinators, etc. You may need supervised visitations with your children if the other parent has convinced the court that you are a threat to the children, or a danger to the other parent, or at risk to take the children and run. You may need drug and alcohol treatment or monitoring. And your everyday life will be interrupted by hearings, depositions, etc. Clearly, the quality of your life will suffer.

You also become a burden to your community. There will be high costs for the courts, security personnel, mental health workers, guardians for the children, special children's services, and added services in the schools.

However, of greatest concern is the cost to your children. Your continuing conflicts with their other parent lead to much greater fear and worry in your children. They may fear that you will harm their other parent, or that you may harm them. It puts them in a very stressful loyalty tug of war between their mom and dad - a war that they cannot win, because they love you both. They may become angry and confused, themselves, because they see you hurting the other parent - someone they love, someone they know you once loved, and they don't understand why this must be.

Your fighting is emotionally traumatic for them. They will experience very strong reactions, a roller coaster of emotions. They most likely will have no way of coping with these powerful reactions. They may have nightmares, sleeplessness, stomachaches, and illness. They may become very aggressive, verbally, and physically with you, their other parent, or with other children (at home or at school). As teenagers, they are at much higher risk for substance abuse problems and earlier involvement in sex.

Their high levels of stress can lead to both physical and mental health problems, both now and later in life. They will likely have difficulties concentrating in school and their grades may decline. Ongoing stress causes cortisol release in the body, which damage part of the brain used for memory and emotional control. When your children are adults, they are at much greater risk for problems with their own spouses and children. They are more likely to suffer through a divorce or separation because they will follow your example. You have not taught them how to control their emotions, compromise, and forgive.



### COSTS OF YOUR CONFLICT TO YOUR COMMUNITY

- Court, judge, magistrate, security
- Evaluation, mediation, counselors
- Guardian ad litem
- Children's services
- Schools (four times more services)

Do you want your children to have to live with these problems? Of course not. So, what can you do about it? Well, the conflict must end. To end it, we need to know why it is there.

### COSTS OF YOUR CONFLICT TO YOUR CHILDREN

- Fear and worry
- Loyalty tug-of-war
- Anger and confusion over love for parents
- Emotional trauma; nightmares, stomachaches, aggression, self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, and earlier involvement in sex
- Higher stress level
- Physical and mental health problems
- School problems



## The Causes of Conflict

The biggest causes are related to one or both parents failing at the tasks of separation and divorce. At the beginning of your relationship, when you were dating, and even in the early stages of living together, you did a lot of work at learning to be together. While much of it may have seemed to come naturally, courting is essentially relationship building. Few people could successfully move in together upon their first meeting.

So, you now have a history. You built shared expectations, rituals for doing things, adopted roles within your family, etc. When the relationship comes apart, all the things you have built together do not suddenly get erased. It takes time and work to undo your involvements.

And the undoing is not as easy (and certainly not as enjoyable) as the doing, because your emotional state is more likely negative than positive. Instead of being romantically hopeful, you are disappointed, distressed, and depressed. So, your reserves are low, and your vision is a little narrow. You are likely to be focusing only on your own feelings and needs. You are probably down on yourself because the relationship failed, and your family broke up.

When your relationship ends, you are likely to be in emotional shock. It's hard to see that BOTH of you have been wounded. You want to blame the other parent for your pain and disappointment, and want to get even, to settle the score. It's hard to see and accept the other parent's point of view. You may feel rejected. And, like most people, you probably won't seek help from others to get you through this difficult time.

It's also common for people to react as though the situation is only a crisis for themselves, when, in fact, it is a crisis for their whole family. While you are certainly an individual, if you have children, you are simultaneously part of a family. Families consist of several people, all of whose lives are intertwined. What affects one member inevitably affects the others. Your anger affects how all other members of the family feel. Therefore, if you are in a high conflict break-up, you have failed to protect your children. With methods taught in this program, you can learn to protect your children and take care of yourself.

It is not uncommon for a person in a high conflict break-up to use money as a weapon in the battle. A parent who is obligated to pay child support is supposed to do this for the benefit of his or her children. If you are withholding payment, you have failed to plan for the financial health of your children.

If you have only considered your own pain, your own needs, and your own future, you have failed to plan the process of uncoupling from your relationship. The other parent will be experiencing his or her own pain, will have needs, and will need to plan a future.

### INABILITY TO ACCEPT THE FAILURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

- In emotional shock
- Can't recognize that both are wounded
- Obsessed with fault finding, with blame
- Feel victimized and want to settle the score
- Can't see both points of view
- Feeling personally rejected
- Won't seek personal help

How well the two of you handle these tasks will affect your children's pain, how their needs are met, and how their future unfolds. Breaking up may seem like it is all about you, but, in fact it is a family crisis, and is best handled as a family.

When your family experiences this loss of a sense of family brought on by your separation, you and your family go through several stages of grief. The first stage is **denial** that this is happening, followed by **anger** (which can last a long time). The next stage is an attempt to **bargain** to restore the family, then **depression** when the realization of the loss sinks in.

Finally, **acceptance** and moving on with new roles and structures marks the last stage. These stages don't always occur in this order and take varying amounts of time to resolve. Your first task is to acknowledge with your children and partner the shared experience of loss, then to reorganize the rules, routines, and roles necessary for the new family structure.

**What stage of grief are you in right now?**

**What stage of grief do you think your children are in right now?**

## Resolving Blame and Guilt

Much of parents' conflict when they break up is related to a wish to blame the other person for all that has gone wrong. Equally one-sided is the tendency for some people to take all the blame, feeling guilty for the failure of the relationship. Your internal judge can be harsh, and this can cause you to overreact to criticism from your co-parent.

On the next two pages are some simple exercises that the two of you can do that will help to work through these issues of blame and guilt, and to focus more on your children's needs.

Read over the following beginnings of sentences. Then write in how you would finish each one. Share your responses with the other parent. This should be the beginning of some constructive conversations about how to resolve your marital issues so you can focus on your children's needs and move on.

1. I am angry at **you** for:
2. I am angry at **myself** for:
3. I should have:
4. You should have:
5. I wish we could have:
6. I'm sorry for:
7. I want you to acknowledge:
8. I feel that you owe me:
9. I feel that I owe you:
10. I need to forgive **myself** for:
11. I need to forgive **you** for:
12. By knowing you, I learned and gained the following:
13. I have enriched you in the following ways:
14. For our children I wish:
15. For you I wish:
16. For me I wish:
17. For all of us I wish:

## Increasing Your Focus on Your Children's Needs

It should be clear by now that your children's needs should be the focus of your relationship with the other parent. Your marital relationship is over and needs to be let go. Your parenting relationship will continue forever, and it needs to be strong and healthy. Here are some exercises that you can do (and share with the other parent) that will help you both to clarify your goals for your children, and then hopefully to direct you towards conversations about how you can achieve those goals. Include only things which both of you could agree on:

**A.** We have the following goals and hopes for our children:

**B.** When our children become adults and look back on this period in their lives, we would like them to be able to say the following about us as parents:

**C.** We as parents can achieve the two items above by doing the following together:

**D.** Imagine that your child is talking to a friend ten years from now. They say they got through the family break-up because of something you did. What would you like them to say was the action you took that helped so much?

## Ways to Avoid Conflict

**Limit contact.** You need to limit, and carefully structure, your contact with the other parent. This means you should have contact only to resolve the business issues of parenting — for example, what will be your parenting schedule? At whose home will the children be each day? What about holidays? Birthdays? How, when, and where will exchanges of the children take place? Who will provide transportation? What about ensuring that homework gets done? Who will take the children to their various activities? If both parents wish to attend certain events, with whom will the children go and return, and with whom will they sit? What are the children's financial needs, and how will they be met? If one parent provides child support, is he or she prepared to cover expenses when the children are with him or her? How will the parents provide for the children's health and safety? There are the issues you need to discuss, and no others. This means that if you are in a conflictful break-up, you should NOT discuss your relationship issues with the other parent. Stick to the business of parenting.

**Find a safe emotional outlet.** At this time in your life, you are probably feeling some very strong emotions. You need to find a safe outlet for these emotions. That is, you need to find someone outside your relationship that you can turn to when you are upset, just to unload your feelings. You need to structure some physically exhausting activities to engage in when you are upset — go for a long run, go work out at the gym, split firewood, etc. This will help you to calm down (and will also be good for your physical health).

**Find a sounding board.** A sounding board is a person you can turn to who can serve as a sort of “reality check” on what you are thinking and feeling. This person can give you some feedback on how reasonable the other person's reactions are. So, this person should be someone whose opinions you respect, and someone whom you think is pretty “together.” This person might be a close friend, a wise relative, a religious leader, a therapist, etc. What is important is that you don't unload your anger on the other parent. Ever.

**Get the help you need.** If you have legal issues, get legal help. If you have psychological or emotional problems that you can't control, get psychological help. Lawyers, psychologists, counselors, financial planners, etc., are specialists. They have knowledge and skills that may be useful to you. Seek them out. Parenting coordinators are a new specialty to help work out parenting plan challenges and improve cooperation between parents.

**Adopt a healthy perspective.** Change your view of this time in your life. Yes, you are hurt and angry. Life hasn't turned out the way you wanted it to. But life is far from over. Only the past is over. You can- not do anything to change what has already happened. And you cannot control other people. But you CAN control YOUR OWN present behavior, and you can shape your own future. This is a time in your life to make some personal changes. This is chance to grow, to become a better person, to become more like the people you look up to and admire, to become emotionally and morally stronger. Leave the past where it belongs. This is a time for healing, not a time for revenge. Revenge will only invite counter-revenge, and the losers will be your kids.

**Separate parental from marital roles.** Finally, you must separate your role as a parent from your role as an ex-spouse or ex-partner. Like it or not, that relationship is over. It was an important part of your former life, but it will not be a part of your future. The only relationship with the other parent that matters now is your continuing relationship as the parents of your children. That will never end. You will be parents together forever. If you handle this well, your children will admire you. If you handle it poorly, they will resent you for having failed them as a parent. You control how they will evaluate you.



## Chapter 1: Carrying Messages

Divorced parents usually try to avoid talking to each other. They may be tempted to have the children do their talking for them. This creates a problem for children because many of the messages they are asked to deliver are difficult and usually cause an unpleasant reaction in the other parent. Children then feel torn between the parents, responsible for what happens next, guilty for upsetting a parent, and generally unhappy and resentful about being the messenger.

### An Example of Carrying Messages

Casey, a ten-year-old boy, is asked by his dad to call his mom and tell her that he, Casey, has to be back at dad's house two hours earlier on Sunday because he and dad are going to a party. Casey calls his mom and relays this change in plans. This is the first mom has heard of this, and she gets mad and starts complaining to Casey about how unfair dad is. He then tells Casey to tell dad that she is not going to go along with that plan and that she doesn't get to see enough of Casey as it is. Casey nervously relays this message to dad, who also gets angry and tells Casey to call mom back and tell her that she is to bring him back early or he won't get to see Casey at all. Casey also gets caught in the middle of a disagreement about taking his rollerblades from one parent's house to the other.

Here, Casey is caught between two warring parents and feels very uncomfortable. There is no way out for him. Whichever parent gets their way will leave the other parent angry and defeated, perhaps itching for revenge. Casey does not want to take sides for fear of hurting one of his parents but feels pressured to choose since he is the topic of his parents' arguments. To him, each of these arguments sounds valid, so it is very confusing.

The parents are so caught up in their irritation toward each other that they don't notice how tough this is on their son. If they do notice he is upset, they are likely to blame the other parent as being unreasonable; they therefore see no need to change their own behavior.



Casey is afraid to say anything to his parents when they are angry for fear of making the situation worse. He just wishes they would stop arguing and get along. Like most children, it doesn't occur to him that being put in the middle is unfair to him and that he has a right to expect more considerate treatment.

## Common Messages

- “Tell your mother that I’m going to take you trick-or-treating this year.”
- “Ask your father why he doesn’t pick you up on time.”
- “Tell your mother to stop using me as a babysitter.”
- “Tell your father to make sure that you get a haircut this weekend.”
- “Ask your mom to take you shopping for some decent clothes and tell me what she says.”
- “Tell your dad you want him to do things with you without his girlfriend always being there.” “Find out if your mom got that raise. I’d like to know.”
- “Tell your dad not to call you so much.”
- “Tell your father he has to take you to all your baseball practices or I’m not going to sign you up.”

Children tell us that it is very hard for them to relay a complaint about a parent. They feel like they’re forced to side with one parent against the other when they are expected to do this. Here are some examples:

- “Tell your mother that she’s interrupting our time together when she calls over here.”
- “Tell your father he’d better not bring you back late again or he’s going to hear from my lawyer.”
- “Ask your mom why she’s always so selfish when it comes to choosing between taking you to ball practice and being with her friends.”
- “Ask your dad why he never takes you anywhere without his step-children going along.”

## How Children look at this Situation

When children are asked to relay a message between two parents who don't communicate civilly, they often have some of the following thoughts or feelings:

- A.** "I hate it when they won't talk to each other."
- B.** "I don't want to tell Dad something that will make him mad or feel hurt."
- C.** "Dad is going to ask me something that I can't answer, then I'll have to go ask Mom and she'll get mad."
- D.** "It makes me scared to ask Mom those questions Dad wants answered. Sometimes I wish I could just disappear."
- E.** "They want me to make their arguments for them, and they each think I should be on their side."
- F.** "Mom wants me to ask Dad a question that is really a put-down, and I'll get in trouble if I don't do as she says. Dad will be disappointed with me for not standing up to her and refusing to ask that question."

Younger children and children who aren't very direct with their feelings will often forget to deliver the message. Such forgetting may be a sign that they are trying to escape the stress by blocking it out, and parents should **not** punish them for this.

## How Children Can Get out of the Middle

The simplest way for children to get themselves out of the bind of carrying messages is to ask their parents to communicate directly with each other. This is a tough job to do because children are afraid their parents will see this as disrespectful. Therefore, if their children make such a request, parents should either give them permission to make this request or control their irritation. Here are some ways children can make this request:

- A.** "Mom, it makes me feel [*choose one* – uptight, nervous, uncomfortable, tense, scared, angry, sad, weird, horrible, worried] when you ask me to give a message to Dad. *Please* talk to him yourself."
- B.** "Dad, I really don't want to ask Mom about that. I'm afraid she'll get upset. *Please* call her, email her, or write her a note yourself."
- C.** "I know you don't like to talk to each other, but I really feel tense sometimes when you ask me to be the go-between. *Please* help me out."

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

List three different messages you have asked your children to carry to your co-parent.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

What would you be willing to do to lessen any stress your children might feel from carrying these messages?

What can you say to your co-parent (in a polite way) to help reduce your children's stress?

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

List three messages you have been asked to carry between your parents:

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

What could you say to your parents to improve the situation for yourself?

What could your parents say to you that would make it easier to tell them when you feel caught in the middle?

How do you think other children feel when their parents ask them to carry messages?

Some children find it helpful to practice what they would say to their parents so that when they say it, it comes out more smoothly. Practicing can be done by yourself when you are alone, or with a brother, sister, or friend. If you have friends whose parents are also living apart, practicing and discussing with them can be helpful. You might be surprised to find out how much you have in common, as these things happen in most separated or divorced families. It's just that most kids don't talk about these kinds of experiences because they think no one would understand.

List some people you could practice with and discuss what it's like to carry messages between parents:

## Threatening the Other Parent with not Seeing the Children

When parents are in conflict, it is often tempting to try make the parent who does not live full-time with the children do things by threatening him or her with withholding visitation. Ed and Janet are an example of this problem.

### Example:

Ed and Janet have been separated for two years, but they still are very angry. They argue a lot over different issues, including who was at fault for the divorce, the fairness of the settlement, the children's care and well-being, support payment, and custody and access problems. They often get into shouting matches over the phone or when they exchange the children.

Ed has called to talk to the kids. He has a day off work this week and asks if they want to spend it with him. Ellen, the older child, asks her mother, who replies, "You tell your father that it most certainly is not all right! He calls here at the last minute and expects me to accommodate him. No way!"

Ellen tells her dad what her mom has said. He blows up. "What does she mean, 'the last minute?' She doesn't have any plans and will just send you guys to the sitter again, anyway! Ask her for a good reason why you can't come here." Ellen, her stomach tightening, passes on what her dad has said.

"Give me that phone!" Janet grabs the phone from Ellen's hand. "What's going on here? Do you have any idea how you make the kids feel, getting their hopes up? You know you can't have the kids when it's not your time. I'm tired of being hassled over this crap! I've had it! If you keep this up, you aren't going to see those kids at all. Ever!"

Ed threatens to take her back to court. Janet responds, "Well, you just take me to court, buster, and see how well you do! When you can be reasonable, let me know!"

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

How does Ellen feel when her mother and father tell her to pass angry messages back and forth?

How do Ellen and her brother feel when they hear their mother's threat about not letting Dad see them?

What should the father have done differently?

What should the mother have done differently?

What are some better ways for angry parents to settle their differences?

What should angry parents who can't seem to settle their differences do? Why is it important for the parents to shelter their children from such conflicts and anger?

## Chapter 2: Put Downs

For most couples, divorce or separation occurs because at least one of the partners is very hurt, angry, or disappointed. A combative divorce process makes these strong negative emotions even worse.

Parents often "trash" one another. There is a powerful urge to let others know how much the parent has been hurt or wronged and to complain about how thoughtless or mean the co-parent is. A parent may seek revenge or an outlet for his or her frustrations.

But when a parent criticizes or puts down the other parent, the kids feel pain. Someone they love has been attacked, and they want to come to his or her defense. At the same time, the attacker is also someone they love and cherish. They are caught in a very stressful bind.

This bind can be even worse if one parent demands loyalty or tries to convince the children that the other parent is unworthy of their love.

Even parents who try to control their anger in front of the children may find this to be very difficult, especially when they are tired, frustrated, and angry and things are not going very well.



## **An Example of Put Downs**

Emily and Jordan have returned from a weekend visit with their father. Their mother is folding laundry. The kids begin to whine about being hungry for dinner. Mom gets frustrated and tells the girls to put away their laundry and help with dinner. Getting no response, Mom gets increasingly angry and begins to unload on the girls about their father, making remarks like the following:

- “He doesn’t have to make sure you get your homework done! He doesn’t have to do your laundry!”
- “He buys you toys and junk and things you don’t need just to get even with me.”
- “I get stuck with the job of trying to make you guys into responsible adults, and I take all the crap and whining! He gets to play Good-Time Charlie.”
- “He’s just as selfish and lazy as he always was.”

Mom finally yells at the kids to get to work. They respond by being defensive about their dad, accusing Mom of picking on Dad. She threatens Emily with losing car privileges and asks her children to agree with her that their father is irresponsible. Jordan says she wishes she could be back at Dad’s house. Mom is exasperated. The kids are confused and upset.

Jordan wonders if her father is a good parent after all and misses him even more. Emily is distressed over her mother’s tirade and wonders if they would be better off living with Dad. She thought the bickering would end with the divorce.

## **What Should Mom Do?**

**Mom has unfairly dumped her anger and disappointment on her daughters. She needs to deal directly with the source of her frustration—the father’s behavior or lack of cooperation. But the mother and father don’t get along and usually end up arguing and trading accusations. They need to communicate with less emotion. They need to speak about the issues they find difficult to deal with, but without focusing on blaming.**

## “I” Messages

The parents need to use what are called “I” messages, as opposed to “you” messages. To say “You’re spoiling the kids! When they come back from your house, they are selfish, mean, and uncaring!” is to make an accusation. This invites a defensive counterattack: “Oh, really! Well, they’re just fine when they’re here. Maybe there’s something wrong at *your* house. Maybe it’s *you!*”

Instead, parents can focus on stating the main issue and owning the feelings they have about it. For example, “I feel frustrated when the kids don’t help out and when they treat me, and each other, badly. I wonder if you could help me with this.” This invites a solution.

In an “I” message, one should:

- State one’s feelings about what is happening
- Avoid criticizing the other person’s character or motives
- Ask for a change in behavior

One conversation is not the final solution to the parents’ problems and differences, but it is a start. It sets the tone for cooperation and an understanding of one another’s views. Often, both are unhappy or challenged with the new family arrangements. Both have frustrations and disappointments and have new stresses in their lives. Mom might be struggling with the pressures of single parenting. Dad may be trying to cope with not seeing his children for twelve out of every fourteen days.

One variation of the “I” message is the polite request. You put your request for a change in behavior in a clearly polite form: “I would really appreciate it if you would get them to finish some of their homework. Would you agree to this?”

While the situation produces anger, each must decide that it is in the children’s best interest for Mom and Dad to keep their problems between themselves and to find constructive ways to deal with the frustrations of their new family structure.

## Motives

When we think that the motives behind someone’s words or actions are negative (when we assume someone is *trying* to hurt us), we are very likely to have conflict with that person and fail to resolve differences. This was evident in the several scenes in the video. When one parent thought the worst of their co-parent’s motives, they became more aggressive. However, if they give the other parent the benefit of the doubt and think their motives are not so negative (or even positive), then they interact much more effectively. It is easier to stay in control and develop more cooperation with the co-parent when given the benefit of the doubt. **It is best not to assume negative motives.**

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

Most parents feel some negative emotions about their former partners when going through a divorce or separation and dealing with the new arrangements.

List the three most powerful negative feelings you experience, and describe what circumstances are most likely to provoke those feelings. For each of these, try to guess the motives (the “why”) of your co-parent for doing things that make you upset.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Think of some motives your co-parent may have had that weren't so negative (either neutral or positive motives), and list them here:

Describe three times that you criticized your co-parent to your children:

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

How do you think the children felt at the time? How did they react?

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

How to use “I” messages was described earlier in this workbook. Write an “I” message that you might have used instead when talking to your children in each of the three situations above. Remember that you want to honestly communicate how you feel to your children, but without criticizing their other parent or otherwise causing them to feel caught in the middle.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Write an “I” message that you could have said to your co-parent in each of the three situations above. Remember that you are trying to describe how you feel and you want to get a helpful, cooperative response. Be sure to avoid criticizing your co-parent’s motives or character.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

How can you give your children permission to tell you when you are dumping on their other parent and ask you to stop?

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

Describe some of the things your mother says about your father that make you feel upset.

Describe some of the things your father says about your mother that make you feel upset.

What do you think you could say to your mother and father to get them to stop saying bad things about each other?

Rate how comfortable you think you would feel saying these things to your mother and father. Rate from 1 to 5, with 1 representing “not at all comfortable” or “terrified” and 5 representing “totally comfortable.” Explain *why* you gave that rating.

What could they do that would make you feel better about telling them these things?

Most children whose parents live apart hear their parents bad-mouth each other. If you talked to other children you know whose parents are apart, do you think they would understand your feelings? Would you understand theirs? What ideas could you share with them about ways to get parents to stop bad-mouthing each other?

## **Playing Siblings Against One Another**

In all families, it is common for parents to feel differently about each of their children. Sometimes after divorce or separation, parents will feel hurt when one of their children seems to prefer being with the other parent and will voice this hurt in a way that can divide siblings. Telling one of your children that you are upset or mad or hurt that their brother or sister is siding with the other parent is dangerous. Normal sibling competition can increase when this happens. Siblings may resent each other for appearing to side with one parent against the other and may rush to the defense of the other parent.

In divorced or separated families, supportive relationships with siblings really help children adjust and cope better with stress. This important support is not available when there is strong competition and resentment among siblings, and children are more at risk for adjustment problems.

### **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

What problems can each of the following statements cause for children?

- “Your brother and your father are alike. They’re both selfish and don’t care how others feel.”
- “I don’t know why your sister doesn’t want to go with us. She spends plenty of time with her mom. Maybe she doesn’t like us.”
- “Your brother is not like you. You are kind and considerate and are not selfish. Your dad lets your brother get away with being mean to you.”
- “I think your mom has always favored your sister over you, and sometimes your sister really takes advantage of that.”

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

For each statement below that a parent might say, what could you say to let him or her know how you feel about it? Your goal is to protect your relationship with your brother or sister.

- “Your brother and your father are alike. They’re both selfish and don’t care how others feel.”
- “I don’t know why your sister doesn’t want to go with us. She spends plenty of time with her mom. Maybe she doesn’t like us.”
- “Your brother is not like you. You are kind and considerate and are not selfish. Your dad lets your brother get away with being mean to you.”
- “I think your mom has always favored your sister over you, and sometimes your sister really takes advantage of that.”

## Chapter 3: Money Problems

After divorce or separation, money usually becomes tighter for both parents. During the time parents lived together, arguments occurred most often over how each parent spent or saved money. After separating, this issue is still ripe for disagreements. Since parents are still linked through child support and other expenses arising from having children, they can never really be free of each other until the children are grown, and often are linked together even long afterward.

The parent who receives child support payments often believes that it is not enough to meet his or her expenses and that the other parent should pay more support and for extras, such as school fees, lessons, equipment for sports, and so on. If the other parent has a higher income, a parent often feels justified in demanding more money for the children.

For the parent paying child support, there are often feelings that the support is too high, particularly if that parent has started a new family or has other new financial obligations or less income. Many support-paying parents resent having no say over how the money is spent, particularly if they think the children are not getting their needs met. There are many temptations, therefore, for one parent to complain to the child about the unfairness of the other parent, especially when they are worried about finances.



## An Example of Money Problems

Everett tells his dad that his mom forgot to pay \$10 for his school field trip, which is due tomorrow. The father tells him to ask his mom for the money, since he gives her child support, which is supposed to cover school fees. The father is irritated that his son is asking him for this money at the last minute and launches into a lecture on how Everett's mother should spend more of the support money on Everett than on herself (buying herself shoes, going to the beauty parlor). Dad also asks Everett to tell his mother that his new wife, Jolene, will be coming to Everett's school concert.

Upon returning to his mother's house, Everett asks Mom for the money. She gets angry at Everett for not getting it from his dad and launches into a lecture about how cheap his dad is and how he doesn't pay enough child support while he lives a better life than she and Everett do. She asks Everett if he asked his dad for half of the costs of his school pictures. Everett says he forgot, adding that he really doesn't need his school pictures.

Mom then blows up, believing he is giving up something he had wanted because he was reluctant to ask his dad for the money. She tells Everett that other divorced dads pay for expenses like this, and he should ask his father to do the same. Mom also expresses her anger that his dad remarried and is supporting that woman and her children. Mom says that is why he is so stingy with money for Everett. She tells him that the two of them must stand firm together against the father's stinginess.

At this point Everett would rather miss the field trip and his school pictures than argue his mother's case in front of his father again. He is afraid to repeat any of his father's arguments, which seem somewhat logical to him, because his mom would get even more upset with him. He decides not to mention Dad's new wife Jolene coming to the concert. It really irritates Mom when Everett defends his dad, just as his dad gets irritated when Everett defends his mom.

Everett hears reasonable-sounding arguments from each parent about why the other parent should change. Trying to present the other parent's point of view is a no-win situation for Everett. He doesn't want to take sides, but each parent expects him to do just this.

### Common Complaints About Money

- "She should spend a lot more of the money I give her on you."
- "Let your father try to live on our budget."
- "Ask your dad to buy you some new shoes this weekend. I don't have the money he does, or the free time."
- "Tell your father to save some of the money he spends on his wife for your braces (or college)."
- "If she can afford to fly to see her parents, she can afford to pay for your class trip."

## How Children Look at This Situation

Usually, children don't have the knowledge or maturity to respond to money questions and complaints that their parents raise. They don't (and shouldn't) know details of each parent's budget, so the children can easily be criticized when they try to defend the other parent's position on why that parent shouldn't have to pay for certain expenses. When this happens, children can feel thoughtless or stupid for not having thought of such a logical argument. Or they feel they are now being disloyal to one parent by defending the position of the other parent.

## How Children Can Get out of the Middle

The simplest way for children to protect themselves from hearing each parent's arguments about money issues is to ask each parent to not discuss it with them. If they are asked to carry messages or repeat arguments to the other parent, the children should voice their dislike of doing this. Parents who have temporarily lost sight of the bind this puts their children in need to hear their children say this is hard for them.

We all need reminders to cool off when we become angry. The part of our brain that protects us from danger also prevents us from calmly solving problems. Children are fearful of saying how they feel or what they want when parents are wound up and spouting anger about their co-parent's unreasonable position. Here are some examples of things parents can encourage their children to say when the parents do this:

- "Please talk to each other about this. I can't stand it!"
- "I just don't know who is right. It hurts my head (or stomach) to hear about this."
- "I wish I could make enough money to pay for this myself because then you and Dad wouldn't fight."
- "Each of you has good arguments. I can't figure it out, and I'm confused. Could you please leave me out of this?"
- "Can I just not say anything to Mom about this? She'll get as upset as you are now, and that makes me feel bad."

**Bottom line: It is not your children's job to fight your battles for you.**

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

List three situations where you talked to your children about what your co-parent should or should not be spending their money on:

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Are there times you believe that discussing your co-parent's spending habits with your child is necessary or useful? If so, what are these?

What could you say to your children to get them to speak up when you get angry with their other parent?

## ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

List three complaints you have heard one of your parents make about your other parent that have to do with money.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

What complaints do you dislike the most?

How do you feel when you hear your mom or dad complaining to you about money worries? (Circle all that apply)

worried                      resentful                      afraid

bitter                      bored                      mad

Other: (write as many as you feel)

What can you say to your parents to let them know how you felt about the complaints they make about each other?

## **Events When Both Parents Will be Present**

Children usually want both of their parents to be present at sports and school events, performances, graduations, and so on.

When parents are still hostile toward each other, the children are fearful about them being together at one of these events. When a parent asks a child if it is all right to bring a new spouse or a date, the child often feels scared about the anger this will bring up for the other parent. Another stressful situation for children occurs when a child asks one parent if the other parent can attend an event that is not during that parent's normal scheduled time with the child. The child is torn between wanting both parents to be present and not wanting to make one parent angry.

### **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

How would you respond to your child asking the following questions?

- “Can Dad come to my birthday party?”
- “Mom and her boyfriend want to come to my team’s party after the game. Is that OK with you?”
- “Would you come over to Dad’s for my graduation party? His wife is cooking a lot of good food.”

## Chapter 4: Questioning

When children spend time with each parent in two different homes after a separation, both parents have a right to have certain information about the children's life in the other home. This is particularly true regarding school, doctor and dentist visits, clothing needs, special outings, and the children's general well-being and adjustment to their new lives.

Parents should share information regarding such matters without relying on the children to carry messages. But there are many times when the children are an appropriate source of information about the quality of life in the other home, and it is natural and comfortable for a child to provide information when asked.

Sometimes, however, the children may be a tempting source of information about the other parent's life that may not be appropriate. Many parents are curious about how their co-parent is getting along and what decisions he or she is making about personal matters. The children should not be placed in the role of reporting about these private issues. Children may feel uneasy if they are asked about their other parent's private life. They may feel they are being asked to violate the other parent's trust and privacy.

Further, children may not want to report on certain events in the other home because they fear that the information will be unpleasant for the parent who is asking.



## An Example of Questioning

May, a young girl, returns home to her mom after a weekend with her dad. Mom asks about the weekend, and May responds with moderate enthusiasm, giving an overview of events, including mentioning her dad's new girlfriend, Gina. Mom begins to ask more questions about Gina's involvement, including how much time she spends with dad, whether she sleeps over, whether she tries to "play mom" with May, and so forth. Mom complains when she hears that May has stopped going to her grandmother's house for dinner on Sundays because the grandmother doesn't like Gina. May grows increasingly uncomfortable as the questions become more personal in nature. She drifts off in thought, wondering if she was wrong in thinking Gina was OK, wishing her mom wouldn't ask so many questions, and wishing he wouldn't get so upset about her mom's new life.

Mom is concerned about his daughter's life at the dad's house, but she is also a little jealous and threatened that dad's new partner may be taking on some of mom's role. May becomes increasingly uncomfortable. She senses her mom's reactions to the information and doesn't want her to feel threatened. May is protective of her mom's emotions. This is a natural feeling, but it is not a child's responsibility. At the same time, May cares about her dad and his happiness. She likes dad's new boyfriend and would like to feel that her dad's judgment is OK. She doesn't feel good about her mom's assumptions.

## What Should a Parent Do in Such a Situation?

May's dad senses the change in his daughter's mood and skillfully invites her to talk about it. When May hesitates to open up, her dad reassures her that it is OK to say whatever is on her mind, that he won't be hurt or angry at what she might say.

This is a good approach to take since one of May's concerns is her dad's feelings. Dad makes May feel comfortable enough to tell him that she doesn't like reporting on her mom's life, that it makes her feel like a spy. After he realizes how he has put May in a bind, Dad honestly acknowledges what he has done. He then says that these matters really should be kept between the parents and that he would talk with her mother about his concerns. May is obviously relieved.

**It is important in such situations for parents to send clear messages to children that:**

- **each family member is entitled to privacy,**
- **the children will not be asked to violate this right by having to report to the other parent, and**
- **each parent is supportive of the children's relationship with the other parent.**

However, **if a parent suspects that there is neglect or abuse**, then asking children to talk about events is an appropriate first step. If such concerns appear to be justified, then it is important to go directly to the other parent for more information. In this case, the concerned parent should avoid making it sound like the children are tattling and instead emphasize that the concern is initiated by the questioning parent. If the situation sounds dangerous enough, the concerned parent may need to consider contacting other authorities or consulting with an attorney, pastor, or Child Protective Services in his or her county.

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

Describe three times when you asked your children about the situation in the other home that *you believe were appropriate* (for example, asking about school, health, or social occasions).

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Now describe three occasions when you *inappropriately* asked your children to report on the situation in their other home because for, example, the request violated the other parent's privacy, or your questioning implied that you disapproved of the other parent's choices or lifestyle.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

How did your children react to your requests for information in Questions 1 and 2?

*When you catch yourself* asking inappropriate questions of your children, or when they send you verbal or nonverbal signs that they are feeling uncomfortable, what should you say? Be specific.

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

Most parents ask their children questions about what happens in the other parent's home. Some of these things can be personal and private. Answering such questions may make you feel uncomfortable or make you feel like a spy. List some things that your mother and father have asked you about each other.

How did you feel when you were asked these questions?

What do you think you could do to get your mom and dad to stop asking you these questions? You want them to stop asking about personal stuff, but you also don't want them to get angry with you. What could you say?

## **Making Children Feel Guilty About a Parent's Loneliness**

It is normal for parents to feel lonely without their children. After all, they have gone from having a family every day to having their children only part of the time. Often there is no one else there to fill the gap, at least for a while. This experience will be most painful for parents who no longer live full time with their children.

There is a powerful temptation to want to share the pain of loneliness with the children. Parents should make a point of minimizing the children's need to worry by stating clearly that while the parent may miss the children and will be thinking of them, that they will be fine, will have good times, and will be busy with things to do.

### **An Example:**

"You know," says Missy's father as he tucks her into bed, "it doesn't seem very fair that I only get to see you every other weekend. Your mother has you all the time. It's so long between our visits. I miss you so much in between. Daddy gets so lonely without you. Your mother has a new boyfriend, so I don't think she gets very lonely when you're here with me. And it's only a couple of days anyway. But for me it's two whole weeks! And I don't have anybody but you. I sure miss you, sweetie. Well, time to go to sleep. I love you."

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

**How does Missy feel? What thoughts might she be having?**

**Who might Missy think is responsible for her father's loneliness? Her mom? Her mom's new boyfriend? Her dad?**

It is obvious that the father misses his daughter very much and that the time between visits is painful for him. To avoid having Missy feel responsible, however, what can he safely say to her about his feelings? What should he avoid saying? Why?

Since Dad feels such strong loneliness during his daughter's absence, what should he do? Who else might he share his feelings with?

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

How do you think Missy feels?

What could she say to her dad to make herself and her dad feel better while also being honest?

## Chapter 5: Never Married Parents

There has been a real shift in the relationships of parents who come to court over their children. It used to be that most divorcing or separating parents were in a traditional relationship with a man and a woman who were married. Now, many of these parents are not married to each other. Some parents have lived together—and raised their children together—for many years. They may be same-sex couples who did not have the option to marry or people who simply chose not to marry for other reasons. Some parents have had just a few years of raising their children together, and others have never lived together and have no experience with co-parenting.

When the children are very young, parents are stressed by their many needs. Being able to get a break from this requires trust that the co-parent can handle the infant or toddler.

### An Example of Non-Traditional Parents

A young mom and dad don't have much experience co-parenting their infant daughter, Tonya, together. Dad calls Mom to tell her he is coming over to take Tonya. Mom tells him she just put Tonya down for a nap and that this isn't a good time. Dad insists on his right to see her, then goes to Mom's apartment. When he arrives, Mom tells him to come back later, after Tonya finishes her nap. Dad has to go to a class later and cannot come back. He insists that Mom wake up Tonya and says that she can nap at his mother's place. Mom refuses, and they argue. Mom doesn't want Dad's mother taking care of Tonya because she drinks too much. Tonya wakes up crying, and Mom insists Dad leave. He does.



## What Should the Parents Do in This Situation?

These parents need to get in the habit of talking to each other when they are calm and not demanding. Trust will not develop when either parent is fearful of the other or worried about the quality-of-care Tonya will get. Dad can learn how to calm the part of his brain that causes him to get angrier. He can repeat back to Mom what she is saying by using **Active Listening**. This way Mom will know Dad is hearing her concerns. Mom can also use Active Listening skills to let Dad know that she hears his worry that he won't get enough time with Tonya and won't become important to her. Both Mom and Dad could use **Self-Talk** or **Stop-Look-Listen** skills before speaking. This will help them to calm themselves and stick to the subject.

Mom and Dad can learn to become more aware of their own feelings and thoughts that take over and prevent them from cooperating with each other. They can learn to stop the negative judgment. They can learn to think more positively. This has the effect of calming negative feelings (fear, anger, and worry). When parents learn to step back and reconsider the negative thoughts and feelings, they feel safer and more in control of how they respond. They will make better decisions and allow their better nature to step up.

### ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS

What are some “I” messages that Dad could have used when he asked to see Tonya?

What are some “I” messages Mom could have used when she told Dad he could not see Tonya when he wanted to?

List three signs that you are getting worked up.

List three things you have done to calm yourself when you got too worked up.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How was your reaction different when you were calm compared to when you were very worked up?

List some simple steps can you take each day to:

- make yourself aware of your stress level.
- calm yourself.

List at least five steps Dad can take to build trust with Mom so that she will be willing to let him have more time with Tonya.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

## Chapter 6: Arriving Late

Let's take a look at a couple of parents who are having a lot of conflict. Maybe you can see yourself in this situation. Let's look at WHY these two people fight. What's in the way of being reasonable? What "buttons" is each pushing to get the other one upset? What do you think their daughter is feeling?

In this scene, Dad shows up late to pick up Sarah and Mom is angry. Sarah wonders if her Dad will show up at all and tempers run even higher when Mom's boyfriend gets involved.



When a parent is late to pick up their child, especially if it is a pattern, the impact on the child and the other parent is negative. The parents can get into a fierce argument when they assume the worst about each other's motives. When new partners are involved and criticize the other parent, tempers flare and the problem is not resolved. The child feels very stressed and can feel responsible for the fighting.

## So, what can be done when you don't feel you can control the fighting?

You could go to court and try to force things the way you want them to be. But be cautious — going to court can create further anger and resentment and may actually prolong the conflict. And, the court may not agree with you. In general, it is best to avoid court as much as possible. It is expensive and time consuming. And, while it will issue orders, that is rarely the end of the conflict. This is because when the court rules, it usually rules in favor of one parent — and that means that it rules against the other. The “winner” will feel vindicated (“I was right! The court agrees with me.”). The “loser” will feel angry and unsatisfied (“The court is crazy! They didn’t understand me. I need to go back and make a better case. I’m not going to give up until they see things my way!”). You are rolling the dice when you go to court. The judge may have up to 50 cases in a day and will not have adequate time to hear all the relevant facts in your case. So, he or she will make a decision that may not go your way.

**But, if things are serious — and possibly dangerous — then you should consider taking some legal steps.**

You can ask the court for a temporary ruling of a parenting plan. This would clarify living arrangements and access by both parents until a final hearing is held. It can then be modified or left in place if circumstances have not changed. At any time in the future, orders can be modified.



You can ask for a restraining order if harassment or stalking is taking place, especially if you have real reason to believe that you or the children could be harmed. Restraining orders need to be followed by all parties. If they are not, the violator can be found in contempt of court and may be fined or imprisoned. Also, one’s standing in future court hearings may be jeopardized. If you think an order is unfair, you can ask the court for a review.

You can ask for supervised access so that an unstable or overly angry parent will be allowed time with the children only in the company of an officer of the court or another responsible adult, or under very controlled conditions. Such supervision can also be asked for if there is reason to believe that a parent is likely to take the children and run. You can ask for mental health evaluations if that is a concern. If it is found that a parent does indeed have a mental health problem, treatment can begin, and supervised access with the children can be arranged.

**There are other options that are less threatening to the other parent, and probably more constructive. These options are available and appropriate for all but the most severe cases of parental conflict.**

Most communities are now requiring all divorcing and separating parents to attend co-parenting educational classes. These classes can be quite helpful in prompting parents to step outside their own concerns and learning to see the situation from the points of view of their children and the other parent. A few classes can be very helpful in teaching new communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and coping skills. If your community does not automatically order parents to participate in such classes, ask that both of you be ordered to attend.

Again, many communities automatically require divorcing or separating parents to try mediation to resolve their problems before they are allowed to come to court. Mediation can be appropriate for almost all couples in conflict. Mediators are individuals who are specially trained to remain neutral and to help the two of you to design a plan that will meet everybody's needs. Mediators are not judges; they do not impose solutions. Most people who try mediation find it to be very helpful, and they like the solutions. They rarely go back to court, because the plan is their own, and they both have agreed to it. And it is usually much less expensive than going to court! You can ask the court to order the two of you into mediation.

Sometimes it is appropriate to ask the court to order you both into evaluations by specially trained psychologists or parenting plan specialists. Be sure that assessments of both mom and dad's parenting abilities are done in their homes (rather than somebody's office), with observations of you and your children together. Psychological tests alone cannot assess parenting abilities. Often the evaluator recommends therapy and a parent coordinator. You can save yourself time and money by seeing a therapist or parent coordinator first, and you may not need a custody evaluation.

Sometimes you can avoid arguments and unpleasant confrontations by arranging neutral or public places to exchange the children. Probably more children are exchanged at McDonald's restaurants than any other place in America. Or you can arrange an exchange without ever seeing the other parent, such as dropping the kids off at a trusted relative's home for the other parent to pick up later, or one parent takes the kids to day care or school, and the other picks them up. These types of arrangements can be imposed by a court order.



## Active Listening

“Active listening” is a skill that helps you tune in to what the other parent is saying. As the name suggests, you actively work at hearing what the other has said.

Stop thinking of your next accusation about him or her. Instead, listen to what the other parent just said to you, and then try to summarize back what you just heard. For example, when Kathy said something about Wayne always being late, Dad could say back to her, “I see. Check me on this. What you’re saying is that when I’m late and don’t call, Sarah worries that maybe I won’t be coming at all.” Mom will then correctly conclude that you heard her, and that you understand her issues. She will calm down.

When it is clear to Mom that she has been heard correctly (she will send a signal — like, “Yeah, that’s right.”) then Dad can try to use his communication skills to get across his concern.

For example, Dad could say: “Gosh, I’m sorry. I really don’t want Sarah to worry about me showing up. I had no idea. I’m sorry that you have to deal with that kind of situation. I’ll try to do better. I think sometimes I’m late because I get real upset at the prospect of running into Bob at your house. I’d feel better if maybe you could ask him to not come to the door when it’s time for me to get Sarah.”

See how much better that sounds?

### HOW TO USE ACTIVE LISTENING

1. Listen to what the other person just said.

*“You’re late! You’re always late! You try dealing with kids when you’re late...”*

2. Try to say back to the other person what you think you heard the person say. *“So, when I’m late and don’t call, the kids worry and you get frustrated trying to reassure them that I’ll be there...”*



## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

When your ex is complaining to you, what can you do to calm them down so that you can problem-solve together?

Here are a few other options:

- calm yourself so you can remain less emotionally involved
- ask questions about their point of view, and avoid challenging them
- ask the other parent for their proposal or solution
- having a picture of your children visible when you meet can help you be better attuned to them.
- ask about what the children need
- ask about what the other parent needs
- ask what you could do to try to meet those needs

Write down what you might say to your co-parent when you are exchanging your child(ren):

Write down how you might calm yourself if anger arises:

## ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

Write down a time when one of your parents was late or did not follow through on something they said they would do:

Write down how that made you feel:

Write down how you could tell your Mom or Dad how you feel the next time something like that happens:



## Chapter 7: Communication Problems

Divorcing/Separating parents tend to have a lot of conflict and little communication. Conflict resolution isn't easy to achieve, but it can be done with continuing to use the skills you have learned.

In this scene, Sean comes home from his Dad's house and has not yet started his book report. It is now Sunday and Mom is not happy that he had two weeks to complete the report but didn't. Dad is upset that Mom didn't have Sean complete the report before his weekend.

What can be done?



In this case, using communication skills like “I” Messages, Active Listening, Self-Talk and Parallel Parenting can be very useful.

Most parents who are still together take care of parenting either by doing things together, or in a series of exchanges of duties. When the couple separates or divorces, this becomes very difficult to do, if not impossible.

Since each parent now has his or her own home, each tends to want to do their parenting in their own way. This is in part because of ongoing anger and conflict — neither wants to “give in” to the other's wishes. In a way, it is an attempt to assert a newfound independence.

At the same time, however, it is likely to increase anger and conflict, as the other parent is seen as being stubborn, selfish, and uncooperative.

## An Example of Parallel Parenting

What works best in these kinds of situations is for each parent to do their parenting separately, but to do it in parallel. That is, they have agreed on standards and expectations for the children, and they have agreed on how to help their children achieve these goals.

The key to parenting in parallel is that the parents must communicate about important issues, keeping in mind their common goals for the children, and must negotiate how they are going to get their parenting done.

This type of parenting is similar to being business partners. You don't live together, but you have to cooperate in pursuit of a common goal.

## Ask Questions to Learn the Needs of the Other Person

**ASK QUESTIONS.** By all means, ask questions. But ask them quietly — don't shout them. And remember, the purpose in asking is not to accuse or blame the other parent, but to gather information so you can better assess the problem and help come up with a workable solution.

Ask about what the kids need. Ask what the other parent needs. Ask how the other parent would like you to try to meet those needs. You will be surprised at what you learn, and you will be pleasantly surprised when the two of you begin to have a constructive conversation instead of an argument.

Notice that the questions we suggest are open-ended. You will get more information this way. If you use closed-ended questions, the potential answers are limited to just what you are looking for. For example, "Don't you think you should help Sean with his homework?" That's close-ended. The other parent can only answer "yes," and you haven't really learned anything. The other parent will feel like you set a trap.



## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

What skills did Mom and Dad use to resolve this potential problem, and to show good parallel parenting? Can you spot at least five skills? List them below:

- 1.**
- 2.**
- 3.**
- 4.**
- 5.**

How was Mom's thinking at the start of this scene helpful?

- 1.** She did not attribute Sean's forgetting his homework to something negative (like laziness), instead giving him the benefit of the doubt.
- 2.** She planned what she was going to say and reminded herself that her goal was getting Paul's help and avoiding an argument.
- 3.** She planned to make a polite request rather than a demand.
- 4.** She planned to keep the communication brief, stay on the topic, and keep a business-like tone to her voice.
- 5.** She tells herself to think positive, to pretend that Paul is a co-worker, and she takes several deep breaths to relax herself.

Mom promises to supervise what Sean has done on his homework when he gets home. This let Dad know that she will support Sean being responsible and share the work with him, and it lets Sean know that both parents are expecting him to be accountable and that they support his efforts.

There are many ways you can establish a cooperative alliance with your children’s other parent. Think of goals for your children that you probably share with that parent, as you did earlier in this manual. Create five brief statements you can make to your “ex” to establish a cooperative alliance. You may use this list of goals most parents have for their children.

- |             |                |                      |
|-------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Responsible | Cooperative    | Compassionate        |
| Playful     | Mature         | Strong               |
| Assertive   | Self-confident | Happy                |
| Relaxed     | Enthusiastic   | Successful in School |

Example: “I’d like it if you would encourage Julie to have a friend over this weekend. I think we both want to see her improve her confidence with making and keeping friends.”

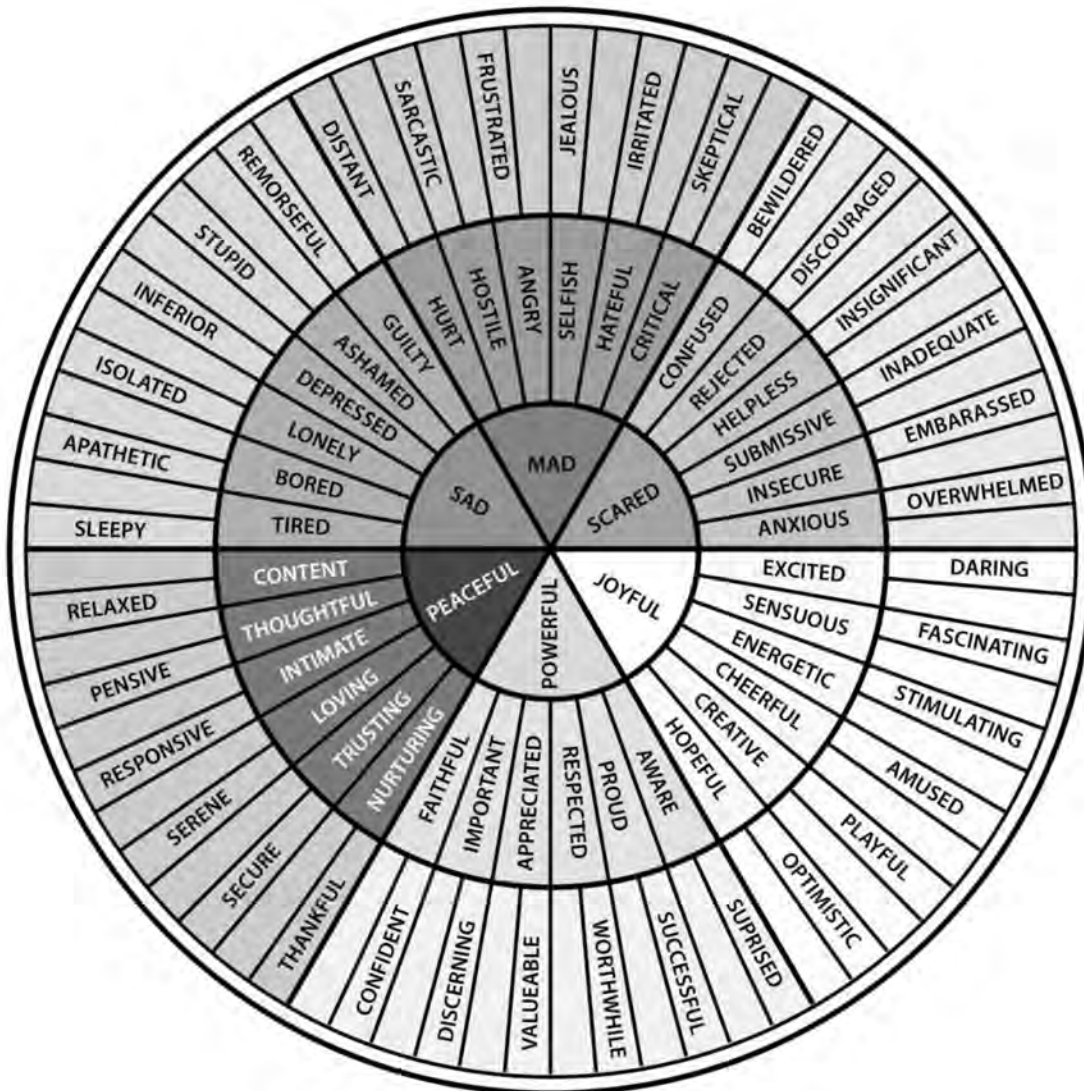
- 1.**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
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- 5.**

## ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

Take a look at the feelings wheel below and color in the section of how you feel when Mom or Dad argue.

Now color in how you feel when you get in trouble for something.

Last, color in how you feel right now.



## Chapter 8: Parents Not Talking

Ashlyn's father arrives a little early to pick her up for his time with her, but Mom sees this as him trying to manipulate her. Mom makes Ashlyn wait to go out to the car with her Dad and in turn, Dad gets upset with Ashlyn for having to wait.

If these parents continue to refuse to have contact, it can lead to further stress in their daughter, and makes it more likely that one parent will begin seeing Ashlyn less because they don't want to have interactions. Who loses in this situation? Everyone, especially Ashlyn.



When children lose regular, meaningful contact with a parent, their risk for developing a variety of serious problems goes up: behavior problems, depression, suicide, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (because they are more sexually active earlier), and school failure. Surely, these are not outcomes you would wish for your children.

A combination of low self-esteem, absence of a clear role, and rejection from the children leads many fathers to stop seeing their children, especially when they are far away. A decrease in contact may signal a need for family therapy to re-establish regular contact. Even when finances and distance allow only infrequent contact, spending the summer together, though not sufficient for most children, allows an opportunity to maintain a close parent-child relationship (and provides a break for the residential parent).

Calling regularly (preferably at set times so the children know to expect it) and letters, texts, and emails help the children deal with the loss of contact. Emailing or texting audio files with the absent parent telling a story to the child, playing games online, or discussing a movie or television show both have seen are some of the activities to help maintain a relationship. For young children, who have trouble with concepts of time, give them a calendar with the date of the next contact circled and noted. Some children like to cross off each day before they see their other parent, so they feel they are making progress dealing with the absence.

It is always a good idea to put at least one picture of the absent parent in the child's room. For school aged children who can use the Internet, email and texting are excellent ways for them to stay in frequent contact with the absent parent. Not only can written messages be exchanged, but also pictures can be sent as attachments, webcams and video (i.e., FaceTime calls) allow the parent and child to see and speak to each other when apart.

The book, *101 Ways to be a Long Distance Super Dad* is full of creative, workable ideas. There are also excellent suggestions, for both moms and dads who are separated from their children, available at [www.daads.com](http://www.daads.com). This website offers a free weekly email reminder service for absent parents to communicate with their children and gives them a different way of doing so each week.

When a lack of confidence in parenting contributes to loss of contact with the children, the parent should attend parenting classes, look for instructional DVDs on parenting, or buy a self-help book on parenting.

The self-help online program ***Parenting Wisely*** ([www.parentingwisely.com](http://www.parentingwisely.com)), has been very effective at quickly improving parenting skills and confidence in just several hours of use. These skills can be readily learned and will quickly improve with practice.

It often helps for the absent parent to arrange to spend time with a friend of the same sex when they both are with their children. In this way, the experienced friend can be an example and a coach for the uncertain parent. Support groups such as Parents Without Partners and Mothers Without Custody can help team up single parents for support.

In addition, your local community may have programs or groups you can join. Check with your court, children's service agencies, local college or university, religious groups, or community mental health organizations for more information.



## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

List three other reasons parents do not see their children regularly after separation that do not have to do with the residential parent.

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Write down how you think your child would feel if they lost contact with you or their other parent:

Think of a time where you felt that your co-parent was purposely doing something to get a reaction out of you:

Now write down how you could have looked at the situation differently to reduce the stress on you and your child(ren).

Write down the risks for children when they lose regular, meaningful contact with a parent:

## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

Write down a time when you missed your Mom or Dad:

Did you tell your other parent that you missed Mom or Dad?

Try saying to your Mom or Dad what you might say if you miss one of your parents.

Write down some feelings you have when you miss someone you care about:

- 1.**
- 2.**
- 3.**
- 4.**

Now write down some activities you can do to feel better when you have the feelings above:

## Chapter 9: Parents At School

When Dad shows up at Armand's school, both parents and the new boyfriend have a hard time communicating effectively. Both Mom and Dad call for Armand once he exits his class and put him in the middle of a tug of war.

In situations such as this, where both parents want to be there for their child, there are many things that they could do to ease the distress of separation or divorce on their child(ren).

Here we will present some simple suggestions for doing things that can make a big difference in the two areas most critical for children: Conflict and loss of contact with a parent.

Think of how these different areas may have an impact on Armand now, and in the future.



## **NEW COMMUNICATION SKILLS:**

You can learn how and when to use new communication skills. This is easy, and very important. If you yell at the other parent, and make accusations, this will simply result in the other parent yelling back at you and making counter-accusations. Nobody likes to be yelled at. It makes you want to counterattack, to defend yourself. The whole encounter spirals downward, getting worse and worse. Break that cycle by learning and using the following easy communication skills.

**ONE TOPIC AT A TIME.** First, before meeting with the other parent, decide what topic you are going to talk about, and vow to stay on just that topic, no matter what the other parent says. Resist the temptation to counterattack by dredging up your long laundry list of complaints about the other person. One topic at a time. Stick to today's topic. Keep directing the discussion back to that one topic.

**"I" MESSAGES.** Too often when we are angry, we slip into using "you" messages. A "you" message is an accusation: "You are irresponsible. You don't make the kids do their homework. You are lazy." And so forth. How does it make you feel when someone uses "you" statements? If you are like most people, it makes you want to say, "Oh, yeah? Well, you.....!"

## **Short of going to court, are there things that you — the parents — can do on your own? Yes!**

**First let's look at some basic facts about conflict.**

**CONFLICT IS PART OF LIFE.** It is important to note that conflict at some level is simply a part of life. But while conflict may be inevitable, it is not inevitable that we should react to it by getting even angrier, thereby making the situation worse. And we don't have to react to it by lashing out at the other people involved or striking back should they lash out at us. You cannot control how others will react in a conflict situation. But you can control how you respond.

**TYPES OF CONFLICT.** There are two types of conflict. Destructive conflict is the type that is most harmful and is the type you typically think of when someone says "conflict." It involves blaming — you are right, the other side is wrong. One side wins, the other loses. And the loser typically retaliates.

On the other hand, constructive conflict leads the parties involved to want to find a solution. Instead of trying to prove who is right, the focus is on solving the problem so that both sides can get on with a less conflictful life. It takes skills and patience to focus on problems instead of blame and winning. While not easy at first, you can learn to use these skills.

## Using AIKIDO to Bend with Conflict

**Aikido** is an ancient Japanese philosophy for living with conflict that many people find easy to learn and very useful. Essentially it involves bending, but not breaking, in the face of conflict. Grass bends in a strong wind, but it doesn't break. You can do the same in conflict — let it blow over you like wind. Bend with it. Then bounce back. So, when the other parent attacks you with verbal hostility, stand your ground quietly, let the attack flow over you, and move on calmly with your request. With no reaction from you, the other person will soon give up, literally running out of wind. But some parents will intensify their efforts to get an emotional reaction from you. In this case you have to stay with your strategy until that parent gives up on getting an emotional reaction.

Center yourself. Find the inner, calm you. Take a deep breath when you feel angered. Pause. Breathe deeply before responding, and reply from strength of purpose, not anger.

Your first impulse may be to lash out. Try to set aside this reaction and figure out what the other person's real concerns are. The other person is upset. Ask yourself why. See if you can accept what the other is trying to say, in spite of the torrent of angry words. Accept that from that person's point of view, there is something important that you need to hear.

Calm yourself and ask questions of the other person to try to clarify his or her concern. After the torrent of words and accusations, take that deep breath, center yourself, and calmly ask questions that will help you to see the problem from the other person's point of view.

Make your concern real. Instead of, "What is your problem!" try "I can see that you are upset. I'm trying to understand what it is that is bothering you so I can help find a solution."

This will lead you to working with the other person to solve the problem, instead of challenging their view of the situation. Acknowledge that you haven't responded well in the past, but that you now want to work with him or her to avoid this problem in the future. You will notice a remarkable change in the air, as the other person must acknowledge your openness and sincerity.

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### USING AIKIDO

- Accept conflict, move it out of harm's way
- Center yourself; take deep breaths
- Don't get defensive; accept the other person's concern
- Remain detached; calmly ask questions and listen to the answers
- Work with other as opposed to challenging them

## **ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS**

List below at least two ways that you have put your children into a loyalty conflict (if you can't think of any, ask your child — they see things differently than you do):

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

Write down what you might say if you saw your co-parent at your child(ren)'s school or function:

Think of a time when you felt that you put your child in the middle of your conflict with your co-parent and how you might change that interaction in the future:



## **ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN**

Write down how you would feel if you had both parents at a school meeting or a special day:

Why would you feel that way?

List some things that you can think of where you would like both Mom and Dad to be there:

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

In summary, the tasks of letting go of anger, reducing conflict with the other parent, and learning to do parallel parenting are tough challenges. With the ideas in this manual and the exercises that allow you to practice the skills featured here and in the program, you will make steady progress. If you work on giving the other parent the benefit of the doubt and remember that you both have very similar goals for your children, these skills will work much better. Your conflict will not change overnight, but with your determination and focus on your children's needs, you will surprise yourself how far you can progress. You can improve your children's chances for future happiness and good adjustment by staying in regular contact with them and shielding them from your conflicts with their other parent.

