

Managing Conflict and Mood Regulation

Most conflict involves a difference of perception

A long-term study of divorce found that even decades later, many divorced parents were still deeply mired in anger, pain, and resentment. Half of the women and one third of the men were still intensely angry at their former spouses ten or more years later. Sadly, anger had become an "ongoing....dominant presence in their children's lives as well." (1)



Let's get through this with intention:

1. Honestly, how does your own behavior impact the co-parenting relationship?

2. I express conflict and feelings by...

3. How can I take responsibility for its consequences and do the hard work of changing habits of anger and conflict?

Managing feelings:

When you are engaging with your co-parent recognize if what you are feeling is related to the prior relationship together, the separation or the co-parenting relationship. Often old feelings, although very valid, are looking for ways to be expressed and resolved. When you have an idea what your emotions are about then you can manage them effectively instead of displacing or projecting them. For example, if you are angry that your co-parent did something today that they did when you were together, you can check in with yourself and decide how you want to respond. Is this the time to bring it up, is it even resolvable or do you need to set this feeling aside and address it with someone that can support you?

One successful approach is to see this as a business relationship now, you are both working for a similar goal and outcome. Try to keep emotions out of the conversations, and please don't push your co-parent's buttons. You probably created some of the triggers they have and activating them can cause more emotional damage. Come into conversations respectfully. If you are looking for a fight, it's best to deal with your own feelings before engaging with the co-parent.

Emotional Regulation:

Your child needs you to keep yourself in check.

-Stay on task

Remind yourself what the conversation is about as it relates to your child and don't deviate. Especially if you are being triggered, talked down to, prodded or activated somehow, keep the conversation about the co-parenting issue at hand. The both of you can decide on a later time to talk about the other issues. I know this can be difficult because there's so much to say, however learning to focus on what the real topic is will serve the relationship, and give you time to calm down.

- It is absolutely OKAY to tell the co-parent you need some time to regulate or need a break.
- Respect if your co-parent is being flooded with emotions and don't try to push them further.
- If you choose to process emotions, create a space for each of you to share, then come back to the specific topic.

-Create self-awareness around what you are feeling.

Validating your own emotions is an important step to understanding yourself. Ignoring or avoiding them doesn't make them go away. It usually means they will find other ways to be known, such as being mean or spiteful to one another, expressing with aggressive behavior, criticism, annoyance with others or loss of patience.

-Before you react, take a few minutes to reflect.

Some things fly out of our mouths so easily because of hurt, repressed feelings, annoyance or for a myriad of other reasons. PAUSE and ask yourself, **do you want to react or do you want to respond?** Give yourself time to think about what was said or done, how you honestly are feeling and what way works for you to respond. This could take a few minutes, hours, or even days. By interrupting the conflict, your goal is to give space for you to check in with yourself.

-Say your feelings aloud

I am that person that talks to myself in the shower, while I'm cooking, in the car or to my dogs when I am processing something more difficult. I hear everything in my head in my own voice and it's not only comfortable, it's familiar. However, often when we say something aloud, it sounds very different. It can offer you a new perspective to the situation or conflict. Plus, by saying it aloud you are releasing it from your internal dialog and out of the body. It may have more of a charge, less of a charge, you may feel compassionate, think it's not a big deal or hear yourself and realize that whatever it is, it's important. Whatever happens, the intention is to help you regulate and understand the emotions more clearly.

-You have a choice

Especially in co-parenting, you can feel tethered to someone that you do not like. This is a hard situation. Most likely, if it wasn't for your child you would never have to see them again. You have choice in everything you do. Unless you are in an abusive relationship, which if this is the case please seek out help, you can decide what works for you. You can decide when to engage, how to engage, how much time you can tolerate the engagement, what your boundaries are, what lengths you are willing to go and what time of day works for you.

-Notice how you feel in your body.It's not all in your head!

Spend 3-4 minutes taking deep breaths. Feel your body, your joints, legs, feet, chest and listen to your breath. Now bring some compassion to any place that feels off, negative or constricted. Don't deny what is happening or what you are feeling. Tell your body "I see you and I feel you." Often we have a gut reaction to something, then ignore it. Listen, it's telling you something.

Our body communicates with us by responding to our surroundings.

Some common somatic responses to feelings are:

Clenched Jaw, Tight Shoulders, Eye Gaze Shifted, Gut Issues, Stomach Queasy, Headaches, Posture Slumped, Fists Clenched and Shallow Breaths.

There is an emotion connected to each of these.

-Once the conversation with your co-parent ends, tend to your own needs.

That could be meditation, exercise, journaling, sitting in quiet, screaming at the wall, punching a pillow, reading a book, venting to a friend or taking a long relaxing shower. Whatever you choose, honor what is happening inside of you so it can be processed. Self-care is very important, especially if you are in a difficult or hostile co-parenting relationship. Taking care of your mental and physical health allows you to be clear minded and grounded, especially if you are interacting with your child.

-Be mindful of what you are saying and doing.

If you start lashing out, understand you are probably hurting that person. If you are trying to hurt the them with caustic remarks, it makes it very difficult to have a positive exchange. In your head you may feel validated or right, however words can do real emotional damage, erode trust or illicit fear. Do your best to avoid conflict. At this point, what value is there in treating the parent of your child so poorly? Words have the power to hurt. Make a commitment to refrain from verbal abuse or foul language.

-Let your co-parent know what you heard.

Healthy communication with your child, a colleague, a family member and your co-parent can evolve into a more positive exchange if you reflect or paraphrase what you just heard them say. "I heard you say that you don't agree with her going to the after-school program." Now take it a step further, "Do you feel I understand what you're saying?" Hopefully this will diffuse any anger, frustration or pain either of you may be feeling. It also validates the other person, reinforcing you are listening to them. This often lowers the defenses either of you may have. It confirms the other person is paying attention.

Some parents aren't able to talk or engage in cooperative co-parenting for a variety of reasons. If you haven't adjusted to the changes from partnership to co-parents, this can be painful. Give yourself space and compassion as you navigate through all of the feelings. Do what you can, get support when needed, be patient and respectful with yourself and each other. Look at the long-term approach of doing what is best for your child.



How to be there for your child

Uncovering and talking about painful emotions may seem like adding more stress to your life when you may already feel deeply worried about the effects of your divorce on your child. But the reverse is actually the case. Understanding and putting words to these emotions is in itself a critical first step in healing. *

1. *Make time to talk and listen to your child. Often kids may feel their parents are too busy and don't want to impose on their time. Don't wait for your child to come to you. They don't need to put effort into getting on your calendar, catching you at the right time or waiting endlessly for you to show that you care. **MAKE TIME TO CONNECT WITH THEM.** If you don't have time in the moment, assure them you will make it and keep your word. Children listen!

2. Your child wants to be noticed, not feel invisible. There is enough research to suggest that the good kids, the ones that are "fine" and not getting in trouble, the well-behaved children, the ones that don't cause problems, don't actually speak up when they are feeling sad, angry, hurt, depressed, anxious or overwhelmed because it would shatter the perception others have of them, so they get overlooked. They tend to "manage it on their own" because the adults around them constantly reinforce they can handle it. **DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH.** For weeks, months or years your child may internalize that nobody cares deeply about them because you don't ask more thoughtful questions. Getting by without making waves doesn't mean everything is stable. Be curious and interested in what interests them.

3. *Listen without judgment. Being able to predict how you will respond strongly influences what children will tell you as their parent. Try to remain neutral, and whatever you do, don't put the other parent down. Let them feel your empathy by acknowledging how they feel. Sometimes they want your help to fix something, but often they just need someone to sit with them in their feelings and listen. No telling what will come out of their mouths, be it sensitive and sweet or angry and direct. Remember they have their **VALID** and **LEGITIMATE** emotions too. Use reflective listening (see communication section) to let them know you are paying attention. A sensitive, caring and compassionate parent will yield better long term results than a criticizing, arguing or defensive parent. How does it feel when you are struggling and need to talk and the person you turn to shuts you down? Deep breaths here, you got this! Listen patiently, more deep breaths, understand their perspective, offer support and love, then more deep breaths.

4. Let your child know you will always love them. A child's fears may not make sense to us, especially if they are worried you may stop loving them. Of course, you will always love them, but do they know that, do they feel it and do they believe it? Your actions will speak more loudly than your words sometimes, so make sure they are congruent. * Research and years of clinical experience show that children have fears and anxieties about their families and their future, often unbeknown to their parents. Children often keep difficult feelings related to divorce to themselves, and they find it very comforting when you express love, understanding and acceptance. Reassurance is key- that your love for them is the kind that will last forever.

5. Your child doesn't want to have to choose a parent. Children often begin to behave differently with each parent. They will take on characteristics and habits of a parent, and this is normal. *Remember children are usually living in two entirely separate worlds. Even without pressure, a child may worry about how the other one is doing. They may even see suffering, crying, fighting, pain, depression or loneliness. Normalize their feelings and provide an empathetic and supportive space for them to share. Even if it is uncomfortable for you, you obviously may feel different about the co-parent, **look through the child's lens.**

- They need to know that both of you are able to hold their emotions, fears, excitement and love for the other parent. They did not ask to be put in the middle and they should not be made to feel there isn't room for you both.
- Please don't ever speak negatively about the other parent to the child. Keep these feelings, which belong to the prior relationship, to yourself and process them in a safe place.
- Don't tell your child the details of why you broke up. This is between you and the co-parent.



***Advice to Parents.** Here are comments kids have made in the safety of a support group:

- When things keep changing, it's harder for us
- Don't be so stressed and mad that you snap at us. It makes us feel like you want to divorce us, too.
- Treat each other right even if you're mad at each other. All the fighting makes my stomach hurt.
- Don't say things unless you're sure. Kids get their hopes up.
- Be there for us. Getting a divorce from each other is one thing. Be a good parent whether or not your marriage works out.

**Abundant behavioral research has demonstrated that labeling emotions promotes calmer feelings and greater control over related behavior. The key to open communication is to be tuned in to your child's behavior and expressions and reflect your understanding by matching your words to the attitudes you observe. Allow your child silence, provide them with space to process their feelings and without pressure, engage in a conversation with them. Remember children who travel between their parents' homes must constantly disengage from one parent and engage with the other. This could be very emotional so be patient.*

PART FOUR: COMMUNICATION

Generally, ineffective communication is one of the primary causes of the break-up in the first place. That doesn't magically change because you're no longer a couple. This may be the most difficult part of divorce, speaking and communicating with your former partner. At some point in time you probably couldn't wait to see each other, share your day, dream of your future and celebrate with one another. Things have changed.

Where do you start?

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WILL GET EASIER WHEN YOU HAVE A CLEAR PLAN, HAVE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS AND HAVE CLEAR INTENTIONS.

If you are able, please share this with your co-parent. It can be helpful to understand where you both are coming from and how you view things. This is not a competition between the two of you, it is a way to seek understanding to make things better. If you aren't able to share, then know this for yourself and be aware of what you need in order to be an affective communicator.

TO DO

What is currently working in your communication? (tone, frequency, method of communicating, agreeing on the children, absolutely nothing)

What do consider are your strengths in communicating?

How do you want your partner to treat you when communicating?

What boundaries do you have about sharing information (career, personal interests, friends, family, money, etc...)

Accepting Things You Cannot Change

The most common complaint / grievance I hear in co-parenting therapy is the other person just won't change.

"If only you would do it this way or that way"
"It's so simple, why don't you get it?"
"Why do you have to make everything about you?"
"This is why we are divorced, because they couldn't change."
"All he/she does is blame me, have they looked in the mirror?"
"What a freaking narcissist. I can't co-parent with someone that acts like this."
"I can't stand you."

Do you relate to any of this? If so, take a deep breath. Know you are not alone.
If you can't relate to this, be grateful.

For a successful co-parenting relationship to occur, you have to understand this person is not your intimate partner anymore. The needs, wants or desires you had previously are not going to be met by them any longer.

Accept that you can't change them. So much easier said than done, but there is a reason this quote exists, "You can't keep doing the same thing and expect different results."

- To some degree you understand their behavior. If it's triggering to you, then find another way to communicate. Boundaries are necessary to protect yourself and let the other person know how you want to be treated. The inverse is also true, if you know a certain behavior triggers your partner, ask yourself if it's helpful to keep acting this way. Eventually trust erodes, tempers flare and children suffer when you are constantly trying to change each other or telling each other what's wrong with them. What you can change is how you interact with one another.
- Acceptance of the behavior does not mean you agree with it. For example, if your co-parent constantly criticizes the way you pack your child's lunch and it's been this way for years, most likely it won't change. Don't engage in conversations about lunch. If it comes up, simply state that the child is fed, you are doing what you can and those comments are not welcome. Thought: I don't agree with your constant criticism, it's hurtful and not useful. Knowing this isn't going to change, I am withdrawing myself from the conversation going forward.

The more you push, the more they will resist. You have choice about engaging! Read that again, you have choice about when to engage with your co-parent and when to say enough is enough. Nobody should be pushing the other, nobody should feel trapped or cornered. That usually elicits the fight, flight or freeze response. If you continue to engage in a way that makes the other person feel disrespected, dismissed, belittled, begrudging, bullied or intimidated, you will not have a successful conversation.

- Take a step back and ask yourself, "What feeling is motivating this behavior?" Check in with yourself to find out the feeling, the need below the feeling, the story or belief supporting the feeling and then ask how can you regulate this feeling.

PART SIX: THE NEED FOR HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

When you hear the word “boundaries,” what comes to mind for you? This word can elicit safety for some and defensiveness for others. At a very young age we begin learning about boundaries, what is acceptable and what isn’t. There are many factors that determined how we experience boundaries, and how we enforce them as adults.

Some considerations to think about:

- Were you scolded or disciplined if you crossed a boundary? What did this teach you?
- Did your family, teachers or friends let you do whatever you want without consequences?
- When you were hurt did you know how to speak up for yourself, or just learn to take it?
- If you were hurting and spoke up, did someone comfort you, listen and help you through it or were you dismissed or talked out of your feelings?
- When needed help, was someone there for you, validating and acknowledging it was okay to ask.

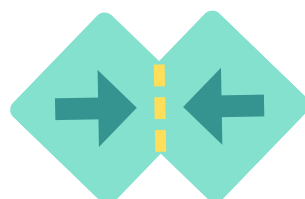
The important question to ask is:

*Do the boundaries I have in place work for me?
They have to work for you, or else you will not likely hold them in place.*

Boundaries are rules, limits, or guidelines someone sets in order to let others know what they are comfortable with and what they are not comfortable with. Boundaries are to identify ways for other people to behave towards them and what will happen if those boundaries are broken. Some advantages of setting healthy boundaries can include a healthy mindset, refraining from burn out, implementing respect into your daily life, and good emotional and mental health. Boundaries differ from person to person and can always change. Setting your boundaries can be a great starting point to have a healthy relationship. (5)

Without boundaries, it will be a struggle to create a supportive structure for cooperative engagement. Focusing solely on your co-parenting relationship keeps emotions under control and enables you to focus on the safety and security of your child.

When you start setting boundaries, some people will respond poorly. One of the most common reasons for not setting boundaries is a fear of conflict. You don’t want to upset or anger people, so you sacrifice your own needs and wants to keep the peace.



Healthy Boundaries



- **Physical Boundaries** are boundaries you set for yourself to ensure physical safety and proximity, including boundaries surrounding sexuality, where and when you go places, and what you are comfortable with physically from others.
- **Time Boundaries** are what you set to create a healthy mindset and schedule for yourself. This can include setting limits on how much time you spend with someone, doing a certain activity and setting time boundaries for work, school and home life balance.
- **Conversational Boundaries** are setting limits about what topics you are open to discussing and what topics you do not feel comfortable talking about. This can include conversations about politics, religion, sexual content, dating, family, friends, vacations, finances and many more.
- **Relationship Boundaries** are limits that are discussed and agreed upon with your partner, family, coworkers, and close friends. Keep Your Personal Life Separate. Your personal life is no longer a shared topic of conversation with your co-parent. When you and your ex-partner made the decision to go separate ways, that's when your intimate relationship came to an end. Keeping this boundary in place will help support your co-parenting roles and dissolve emotional power struggles that you may have experienced in the past.
- **Personal Boundaries** are guidelines and rules you set for yourself to ensure others are being aware of your needs and showing them how to respect and meet those needs in a healthy way.

Respecting Boundaries

Now that each of you have established your boundaries, get ready to hold true to them. Always keep in mind that you are doing this for your own mental, physical and emotional well being. You are entitled to have boundaries that make you feel safe and comfortable.

Some people will do everything they can to resist our efforts to set boundaries; they will argue, blame, ignore, manipulate, threaten, or physically hurt us. And while we can't prevent people from acting like this, we can learn to set clear boundaries and take care of ourselves. The bottom line is that we can't make people respect our boundaries, but we can control how we respond.

- **Do not immediately react to them.** If the other parent does not respect your boundary, take a step back from the situation to think about how this makes you feel.
- **With a business tone and respect, remind the other parent of the boundary you have in place.** They don't need to know the emotional impact on you unless you want to share. Remember to keep the relationship neutral. The other person most likely can't validate your feelings if they don't respect your boundaries.