



When the **CONFLICT** Continues

The right parenting plan
can help defuse tensions

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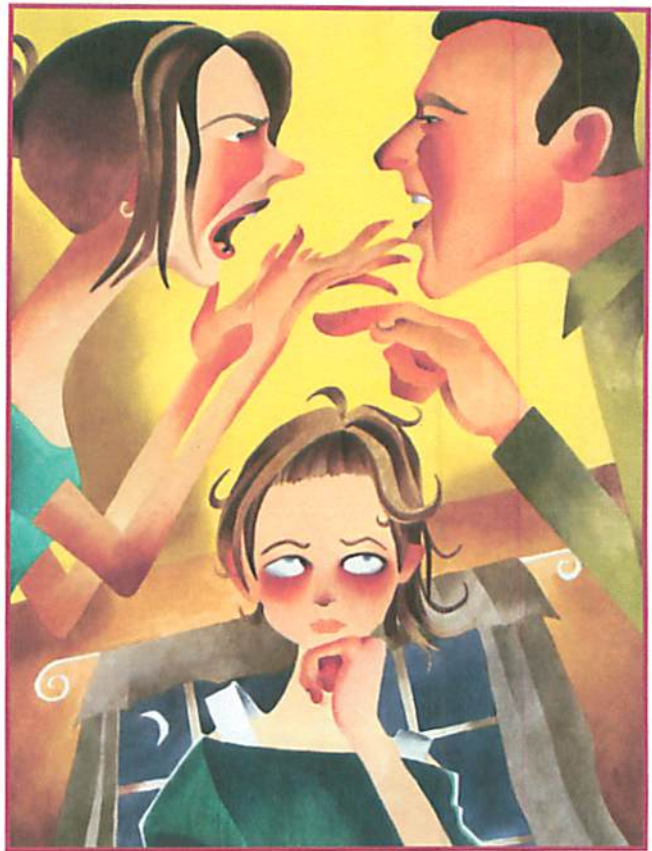
Separation and divorce are major stressors in the life of a parent and child. Everyone in the family must adjust to the new structure, often changed economic circumstances, painful feelings of loss, as well as initial feelings of helplessness as parents and children try to figure out who they are in this new family and how to navigate changed relationships. Although this adjustment usually takes a year and a half to two years, in some families the process goes on for years and conflict between parents continues.

Conflict has long characterized the marital relationship for some couples, even years before the divorce. For others, this conflict is new and has led to or directly results from the divorce. The impact of this conflict on children cannot be underestimated and has implications for the parenting access plan.

Consider this family's situation:

Sally and Don had a seemingly happy marriage until Sally announced that she wanted a divorce. Sally felt stifled and controlled in the marriage and needed to find herself again. Don was strongly opposed to the divorce and wanted to work things out with a therapist. Sally refused, saying that it was too late.

Neither would move out of the house, so they fought over that as well as what and when to tell their three children: Jesse, age 12; Jenny, age 9; and Justin, age 6. Sally wanted to tell the children about the divorce and that Don would be moving out but would see them on alter-



nate weekends and Wednesdays for dinner. Don refused to tell the children until Sally moved out. He wanted equal parenting time, and wanted the children to spend alternate weeks with him.

As time passed, tensions increased. Sally and Don argued constantly, as the children looked on. After nine months, Sally filed for divorce and filed a motion for Don to vacate the home. She also told the children about the divorce and that Daddy would be moving out. When Jesse and Jenny asked Don about this, he broke into tears and told them he would never leave them and that he was trying to get their mother to change her mind.

Impact of conflict on children: Jesse, Jenny and Justin are now in the middle of their parents' conflict. Each parent tells the children something different. They must decide who to believe and who to trust. For Justin, age 6, this is quite frightening as his security is based on feeling protected by his parents. Now he feels helpless and blames himself because his parents argue about him and his siblings. Jenny and Jesse are in the middle of two very different points of view and must also figure out whom to believe, whom to trust, and whom to blame.

One of the biggest stressors for children is exposure to conflict between their parents and, particularly, being engaged in the conflict as a confidant or messenger. At such young ages, these children must figure out on their own who to trust and who will keep them safe. They struggle to

make sense of two very different viewpoints from the people they love and trust most in the world.

Another significant stumbling block for children is that divorcing parents tend to become preoccupied with their own distress and consumed with worries about how they will recreate their identities and move forward. Because of this shift in focus, parenting practices may not be as effective as in the past. Such preoccupied parents find it difficult to keep children's needs at the forefront and to provide ongoing emotional support and responsiveness. The second significant factor affecting children's adjustment to divorce is "good enough parenting." This means having warm, involved parents with appropriate expectations and consistent discipline.

Shielding children from exposure to the conflict is essential. When parents are not living together, transitions should occur in neutral settings and need not be face to face. Parents should communicate via e-mail or apart from the children. When parents fight in front of their children, children tend to feel helpless and invisible. They feel a loss of control and, depending on their ages and personalities, may try to find ways to intervene, believing it is their responsibility, or to cope by distancing themselves and tuning out.

Often children overhear part of a conversation and pick up on a phrase that may be frightening or confusing to them. For younger children, like Jesse, who understands things quite concretely, hearing his mother say, "he will be gone soon" can elicit fears of abandonment and fantasies of never seeing his father again. Parents should make every effort to contain the conflict and hide any outward signs of hostility toward the other parent.

Develop a parenting plan: A number of factors need to be considered in developing any parenting plan. Beginning with the pre-separation parenting responsibilities and caregiving arrangements, parents need to think about

how best to ensure continuity in children's relationships with each parent and how to strengthen those relationships. Children of different ages and developmental needs require different arrangements. Sometimes, this is less relevant with close sibling groups, but, of course, infants and toddlers have their own special needs.

Unless there has been serious domestic violence, child maltreatment, or a current pattern of untreated mental illness or substance abuse, research leads us to create parenting plans in which both parents care for their children's day-to-day needs, are involved in school and extracurricular activities, and monitor their children's development and responsibilities. The parenting plan needs to build on quality as it leads to closeness in parent-child relationships. We know that children do better in school, socially, and emotionally when both parents are involved in their lives in a positive and active way. The quality of parenting and the relationship between parent and child are more important than the structure of the parenting plan.

One caution regarding high-conflict families: Although it is important to structure the parenting plan in a comprehensive way so that parents have little to fight about, it also is important to provide opportunities for modification to meet the changing needs of children and changing circumstances of parents.

Communication about the children is essential, whatever the plan and whatever the relationship between parents. Effective communication need not be face to face or voice to voice. Parents can communicate via e-mail at prearranged intervals with defined categories of information, such as medical issues, homework, activities, developmental or behavioral concerns, or changes. For infants and babies, a log or e-mail at each transition should include information about eating and sleeping routines and changes, health, responses to soothing, and developmental changes, milestones, and other issues.

Age-appropriate Plans

Following are suggested guidelines for parenting plans based on the age of the child.

Infants (0 to 9 months):

The job of the infant is to develop trust. A parent responds to an infant with food, soothing, and holding, and the baby learns to trust that his or her needs will be met. As a parent effectively responds to an

infant's crying, the baby also learns self-soothing so as not to become overwhelmed. As parents respond to crying or cooing, trust and closeness develop between infant and parent.

As the baby's needs are met over the first six months, a gradual process of differentiation between baby and parent begins to develop, and the baby recognizes and responds more readily to primary caretakers. Between two and seven

months, the baby will soothe and calm more easily with those people. The process of attachment is beginning as the parent consistently and predictably meets the baby's needs.

If parents separate during this first nine months, frequent contact is very important for attachment to develop. Contact needs to include opportunities for all caretaking activities, such as feeding, playing, soothing, bathing, and putting the baby to sleep. Whether that occurs during the day or at night is not important as long as feeding routines are maintained. What is important is that the baby experiences the parent as one who meets his or her needs in all areas. Of course, it is essential that parents either have or acquire the necessary skills, such as filling and holding a bottle; feeding the baby; knowing developmentally appropriate toys; responding to the baby's smiles, babbles, gestures; and knowing how to soothe the baby. ▶▶▶

The baby's needs are best met when parents can communicate about the baby's activities, schedule, and idiosyncrasies. Communicating about the baby's signals and sleep, feeding, waking cycles, as well as sharing tips for staying attuned and being responsive also will help the baby adjust to two separate lifestyles. If parents have very different views about these things and the baby is responding poorly to different caretaking practices and beliefs, it may be better for one parent to have a more limited role.

By about seven months of age, the process of attachment begins. The baby will actively seek contact with and closeness with the preferred caregivers/parents. At about eight months of age, babies develop stranger anxiety. They want to be with their preferred caregivers and are now able to discriminate between those they trust to meet their needs, and

with whom they are developing an attachment, and others. For this reason, between seven and twelve months is a difficult time to reintroduce a parent, after an absence.

During this period, babies need to be able to develop at least one, if not two, secure attachments. This requires short separations and a basically seamless transition between parents/caregivers. If parents cannot communicate effectively about the baby, and/or if one parent is unable to gain the necessary caretaking skills, having one parent designated the primary parent, with the other having frequent short contacts, may be best. Also at this age, babies can be more sensitive to conflict during transitions, affecting the baby's ability to be soothed and comforted. If parents are unable to transition the baby without conflict, a third person may provide a better transition. ■

9 to 18 months

Between the ages of nine and 18 months, the transition from infancy to toddlerhood takes place. There is great and rapid development, including motor skills (crawling, standing, and walking), the refinement of communication from sounds and smiles to words, the organization of emotions (hugs, kisses, deliberate expressions of anger, fears, and anxiety), and the organization of behaviors (imitating, understanding functions, and meanings of people and things).

Maintaining predictability and consistency promotes the development of self-regulation and self-soothing for the baby. Multiple caregivers can maintain a consistent schedule of waking, eating, and sleeping. However, if the baby is particularly sensitive to transition and change, or difficult to soothe, one parent may need to take a primary caretaking role with briefer contact with the other parent.

Developing a parenting plan for babies will depend on two factors: (1) the parents' involvement with the baby before the separation, including feeding, bathing, playing, soothing, bedtimes, and waking; and (2) each parent's ability to be attuned and responsive to the baby's needs. Together these factors suggest how responsive a baby may be to each caregiver. Because separation anxiety generally continues up to eighteen months of age, parents must be sensitive to the baby's ability to separate and transition. Overnight contacts for babies up to 18 months of age can be considered:

- Baby has secure attachment to both parents, usually the result of joint caretaking;
- Both parents have participated in all caretaking;
- Both parents are able to follow a consistent schedule and maintain sleeping and eating routines;
- Both parents are attuned to the baby's needs, both physical and emotional;
- Baby has an easy, resilient temperament;
- Conflict between parents is low or contained;
- Parents are able to communicate nondefensively and with minimal acrimony about the baby's sleeping, waking, and feeding schedules.
- The parent with greater parenting time can minimize his or her anxiety about separation from the baby;
- Breast-feeding routines can be maintained with periodic bottle feeding.

If overnight contacts are not in the best interests of the baby because criteria above are not met, the parent with less parenting time should have opportunities to participate in feeding, playing, and bathing. To develop the skills or connections with the baby, the parent may establish a nap routine that is consistent with the child's already established routine. To further the relationship, the parent and baby should have contact every few days, gradually increasing the length of separation from the primary parent. As with infants, a communication log is essential. ■

18 months to 3 years

This period is one of increasing independence. Toddlers have ever-increasing mobility and language skills, are able to ask for what they want, develop independent toileting skills, and learn self-soothing skills. Because they are better able to differentiate themselves from others, and remember another even when out of sight, they are able to tolerate longer separations from a parent. While most children at this age seek to explore their environments, some toddlers have increased fears of separation, sometimes

nightmares, and may become clingy. Conflict between their parents or exposure to parental tension can exacerbate these fears. Toddlers are often able to tolerate longer separations and more easily manage transitions with older siblings.

Toddlers need predictable and consistent routines and firm limits and boundaries. They may test these limits, and need help learning limits and finding ways to settle and soothe themselves. Toddlers also need a balance of close supervision with opportunities for exploration.

Preschoolers 3 to 5

Preschoolers are able to internalize routines and to rely on a sense of day and night routines. Their social networks expand to children of their own age, teachers, and possibly caregivers. They are learning social skills, such as using words and taking turns, giving them a sense of control. Preschoolers look for opportunities to feel powerful, including mastery of new and challenging experiences. Yet they need the presence of a parent to whom they are attached to support these new experiences. Preschool children are more sensitive to their caregivers' moods and may blame themselves or enlist themselves as a caretaking agent, though through the eyes of a four year old.

Separations from regular caregivers may be difficult for preschoolers and may result in fear or anxiety. They may have night-time fears, such as monsters in the closet or under the bed. They may have difficulties with transitions between homes, but once settled in the other home, calm down and appear happy. Often having a transitional object

that goes with them between homes is helpful. In addition, if the parent who is caring for the child drops the child at the other parent's home, it relieves the child of feeling "taken away" by the other parent. Preschoolers are very attuned to parental tension, anger, and anxiety and may react more to their parent's feelings and lose sight of what they want. Parents must limit their communication in front of the child if they cannot contain their own feelings. To consolidate their developmental gains, preschoolers need parents to be calm and controlled so as to view the world as safe.

Predictable routine and structure also are important for the preschooler. Holiday routines begin to take on importance. They can tolerate increasingly longer absences on a regular basis for up to three days. Multiple parenting arrangements work with this age, with attention to the child's temperament and pre-separation parenting arrangements. It is important that the child have contact with each parent a few times a week. ■

Early school-age 6 to 9

Six- to nine-year-old children are initially learning and then settling into new demands and routines in school and play. They are now focused on experiences with school, friends, and activities, resulting in greater separations from family and more experiences with others, such as teachers, babysitters, neighbors, and coaches. Differences in parenting styles and blocks of time away from a parent are easier to understand and manage as these children have a sense of time and can understand another point of view. At the same time, early school-age children may still find separations from either parent difficult, and having an object or picture that travels back and forth with them may be helpful. At this age, children need their parents to be interested and supportive.

When one parent has been minimally involved in parenting, it is still a good idea for the child to have one over-night each weekend and a dinner or visit of a few hours each week. Such a schedule can expand after a transition period. If coparenting has been shared equally, these children can spend half a week or two weekdays and alternate weekends with

each parent (for example, Monday and Tuesday with one parent, Wednesday and Thursday with the other). Or one parent may have a Thursday until Monday morning one week and Wednesday and Thursday the second week. Whatever the parenting plan, it needs to be consistent and provide the child a time and place for schoolwork, friendships, and other activities. These children are very rule-bound; they can understand a schedule that provides predictability and consistency.

To develop increased competence, early school-age children at this age need to be protected from ongoing conflict between parents. Often, transitions that occur in a neutral setting, such as at school or at the site of an activity, shield children from unpleasant interactions between parents. Parents must learn to greet each other cordially at such activities or events and then move to separate spaces if they are unable to control negative interactions. Children will also suffer if they are asked to carry messages from one parent to the other. To the extent that parents engage their child in interparental conflict, the child's focus and energy will be diverted from normal developmental tasks and growth. ■

If parents have shared caretaking arrangements, the child has an easy temperament, or there are older siblings, parenting time can be shared evenly as long as the separations from each parent are not too long (not more than two or three days or two nights). If the child has trouble with transitions or is not particularly adaptable or flexible, or if parents are unable to communicate effectively with each other about the child, it makes sense for the child to have a primary home with frequent contact, including some overnights, with the other parent. If one parent has not established the parenting skills necessary to effectively and safely manage a toddler,

frequent contacts can be initiated, possibly with the help of a friend or relative experienced in parenting toddlers.

Cooperation and flexibility between parents is essential to foster optimal toddler development. You may observe regression in newly acquired skills, such as toilet training or dressing and independence, when toddlers are exposed to parental conflict. Again, a log or e-mail exchange between parents about feeding, sleeping, health, and activity issues is helpful. To the extent that parents can put aside their anger or hurt feelings, they will be better able to parent children of this age who can be challenging for many parents. ■



Later school-age 10 to 12

Later school-age children branch out even more outside the home.

They develop increased confidence as they become more competent in activities, skills, and situations. These children tend to be rule-bound, yet are branching out and considering moral issues. They also can understand another point of view and can take another perspective. As a result, children between age 10 and 12 are vulnerable to alignment with one parent. They are vulnerable to diverting energy and focus, which they need to participate in activities, make friends, and develop good study habits, to “being fair” to both parents or to aligning with one parent.

These preteens continue to reflect their parents’ points of view, but take more notice of peers’ interests, clothing, mannerisms, etc. They can anticipate future plans and schedules and are beginning to take more control over their time and decisions, yet require and rely on the stability and security of their parents. They anticipate time and schedules and need

some flexibility in the parenting plan to manage their activities and friendships. These children exhibit a need for some control over their time as they participate in activities.

When parents are in conflict, the child’s anger may fester and be exhibited as alliance with one parent or intense and tumultuous relationships with friends. If the child feels abandoned by the parents’ focus on conflict, he or she may learn excessive self-reliance and avoid participating in the conflict between parents. Such children are very aware of the issues that are being argued and may “assist” one parent as a spy or as an ally, or may disengage too much and too early.

Parenting plans can range from alternate weekends and one evening visit during the school year with shared parenting in the summer, to shared time either alternating weeks or splitting weeks and alternating weekends. Maintaining activities in both homes and helping the child develop increased competence and independence while providing predictability and stability are key. ■

Adolescence 13 to 18

Adolescence is all about change: to the body, dreams and wishes, Friday night

plans, relationships with friends and family. The task of the adolescent is to become independent and have an identity separate from anyone else. While the family continues to be the major seat of influence and guidance, peers, school, and other activities become more of the focus. Parents provide critical guidance and support, anticipate dangers and risk, and help the adolescent practice decision making. Adolescents maintain their own schedules, and parent-child relationships have been known to fall apart if parents are unable to respect the adolescent’s increasing independence and provide flexibility. A critical parenting function is negotiating time and rules, providing a model for decision-making, while relinquishing control.

If parents are absorbed in conflict, their adolescent may slip through the communication void. Parents must be able to keep track of their teenager and communicate about his or her whereabouts, as well as their own empty houses. If they are unable to share information, risks to their teen increase as their adolescent finds ways to break rules and engage in unsafe behaviors. For a resilient teen, distancing from disputing parents and becoming more involved in peer

relationships, activities, and interests can provide a safety net. But for more vulnerable teenagers, difficult peer relationships, poor interpersonal skills, depression, and suicidal thoughts may result from the absence of a good model of problem solving and interpersonal relationships.

A variety of time-sharing schedules will work for adolescents, as long as they have input into the plan and parents are flexible in accommodating the teenager’s activities (including school, extracurricular, and employment). Some of the most valuable time a parent spends with an adolescent is transporting them to activities and attending their events.

Some adolescents need and request that they maintain a base in one home with a traditional alternating weekend schedule. Others want to divide their time with parents by alternating weeks or even two-week periods, to limit transitions and disruptions. In the latter plan, if a parent does not see the teenager at events or activities, the parent may schedule weekly dinners during off-duty weeks. It is critical that parents and the adolescent are clear about where and under whose supervision and authority the teen is at all times. Summer schedules need to be developed after the adolescent’s summer plans for employment, camp, and other activities are established. ■

Conclusion: Research does not support any particular parenting plan. Each family needs to consider the age, temperament, and special needs of their children, previous care-taking arrangements, and the child’s relationship with each parent. Most important is that parents are able to communicate about their children on a regular basis. Parents do not need to parent cooperatively, but they must share information so that children’s experiences as they transition between parents are as seamless as possible and children are not drawn

into their parents’ disputes. The most well-adjusted children know that their parents are more focused on their children’s well-being than on their own parental conflict. **FA**

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