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How to Hold a Successful Meeting with Your Ex About the Children

Co-parenting in high-conflict situations is challenging but essential for your children's well-being. While it may feel easier to avoid face-to-face interactions, addressing important parenting decisions collaboratively either by meeting face-to-face or online may be important, so that both parents have a voice and that joint decisions are made in the children's best interests. In addition, parents may be invited to come together to a family therapy session.

This guide outlines some principles for a successful joint meeting, even when emotions run high. It is meant to help you avoid if possible unnecessary arguments and stay focused on working toward mutually beneficial solutions.

Logistical Considerations

Before the meeting:

1. **Choose the right environment:** A neutral location such as a community centre, a quiet café, a service station or other venue that is both in public but also provides privacy to talk can help reassure both parents.
2. **Set a time limit:** Agree to meet for a specific duration and stick with it. Make sure the meeting is short (e.g., up to 45-60 minutes) in order to avoid emotional exhaustion and to reduce the risk of falling into an argument.
3. **Agree on an agenda:** Do that in advance and stick with it. Unless there is a very good reason for it, do not include in the agenda items that are outside of the area of issues concerning the children.
4. **Bring tools:** Have a notebook, calendar, or a phone for scheduling and note-taking.

1. Keep the focus on the children

Why It matters: Shifting the focus to your children prevents the meeting from becoming about personal grievances. Remember that your role as co-parents is to prioritise their needs above all else. It is not unlikely that there are leftover issues related to your past relationship that are unresolved but please leave these to be addressed at a different forum.

- **Avoid criticism:** Focus on the present and the future, not the past. Refer to the past only when pointing out precedent regarding things that proved to work well.
- **Use “We” statements:** Collaborate as a “parenting team” to find solutions.
- **What to say:** *“How do you think we can make [child’s name] more comfortable during the transition between our homes?” “We both want what’s best for [child’s name]. Let’s find a way to support their schoolwork together.”*
- **What to Avoid:** *“You always confuse [child’s name] by breaking our agreements!” “You don’t care about what’s best for them.”*

2. Set clear goals for the meeting

Why It matters: Having a shared agenda agreed in advance ensures the conversation remains productive and focused on the issues at hand.

- **Agree the agenda in advance:** Decide on specific topics (e.g., holidays, school schedules, child behaviour issues, school transition, health care particulars, half-term contact, telephone calls, etc., handover location, communication in general, etc.). The topics need to be agreed in advanced. Please stick to the agenda.
- **Document agreements:** Write down decisions to prevent future misunderstandings. You can draft these in advance and finalise at the meeting or after. Treat this meeting as a ‘business meeting’.
- **What to say:** *“Let’s finalise the half-term holiday schedule today, so we can make plans in advance”, “How can we share drop-off rota for after school activities?”*
- **What to avoid:** *“Let’s see how this goes; we’ll figure it out along the way”, “You always find a way to derail these discussions.”*

3. Adopt a business-like approach

Why It matters: Treating the meeting like a professional discussion reduces emotional tensions, cools down the temperature and keeps interactions respectful. Sometimes, when the passions are high, being more ‘formal’ in your attitude can actually help.

- **Stick to the facts:** Avoid accusations or emotional arguments.
- **Remain polite:** Address each other with respect, even when disagreements arise.
- **What to Say:** *“The teacher said [child’s name] needs extra help with math. How can we work together to support that?” “I noticed [child’s name] seems a bit anxious about transitions. Can we brainstorm ways to make them smoother?”*
- **What to Avoid:** *“You’re the reason [child’s name] is struggling in school!” “I don’t have time to deal with your excuses.”*

4. Commit to respectful communication

Why It matters: Respectful communication ensures both parents feel heard, reducing defensiveness and hostility.

- **Practice active listening:** Show that you are paying attention by paraphrasing what the other parent says. Ask questions to make sure you understand correctly. Often escalations happen due to misunderstandings.
- **Avoid interruptions:** Let the other parent finish speaking before responding. This is very important though sometimes difficult to maintain.
- **What to say:** *"I hear you're worried about [child's name] being too tired after practice. How about we adjust their bedtime on those days?"*, *"Thank you for sharing your concerns. Let's see if we can find a solution that works for everyone."*
- **What to avoid:** *"You're overreacting as usual"*, *"That's a ridiculous thing to say!"*

5. Use a neutral ground or a mediator, if this is the only realistic option

Why It matters: A neutral setting or mediator helps keep the discussion balanced and reduces emotional triggers. Also, sometimes this may be the only feasible option. Whether this is the case, you will know from your experience so far.

- **Meet in an impartial location:** Choose a place where neither parent feels at an advantage. It is good for this to be at a public place yet allowing privacy: at a café in a shopping centre or service station, etc. Some parents feel reassured if there is a public CCTV in operation on the location.
- **Consider a mediator:** This could be a professional but also a person that both of you know and trust.
- **What to say:** *"I think having a third-party present might help us stay focused. Would you agree to involve a mediator?"* *"Meeting at the library worked well last time. Can we do that again?"*
- **What to avoid:** *"Let's meet at my house, but don't bring your bad attitude."* (Avoid meeting at one parent's house.) *"I'm fine meeting anywhere, but I doubt it will help."*

6. Time-limit the meeting

Why It matters: Time limits reduce emotional strain and ensure that discussions remain concise and goal oriented. For couples with history of escalatory relationships, often painful patterns of communicating re-emerge after some time.

- **Set the duration in advance:** Agree on a realistic timeframe (e.g., 45 up to 60 minutes).
- **Pause or take a break when necessary:** If tensions rise, agree to reconvene later.
- **What to say:** *"Let's aim to wrap up by 3pm and schedule a follow-up, if we don't finish."*, *"The tension seems to rise. How about taking a break and continue in ten minutes? I will go to get some fresh air."*
- **What to avoid:** *"We're staying here until we fix everything!"*, *"This is taking too long; I'm done."*

7. Prepare in advance

Why It matters: Being prepared ensures clarity about your priorities and helps the meeting stay on track.

- **Anticipate challenges:** Think through potential disagreements and how to address them constructively. Be aware of your triggers and think in advance how you will respond to potentially volatile situations.
- **Bring materials:** Have any necessary documents, schedules, proposals, school reports, etc. ready.
- **What to say:** *"I've drafted a summer holiday schedule to get us started. Let me know what you think.", "Here's the feedback I received from [child's name]'s teacher. Can we go over it together please?"*
- **What to avoid:** *"I didn't have time to prepare anything", "You should have handled this before the meeting."*

8. Address conflicts productively

Why It matters: How you handle disagreements determines whether the meeting remains constructive or devolves into conflict. Escalations will eventually happen and emotions will eventually run high. Being able to resolve this in the meeting will play a positive role in developing mutual trust, so take these opportunities when they emerge.

- **De-escalate tensions:** Take a moment to breathe or pause if emotions escalate. Take a break if needed.
- **Focus on solutions:** Acknowledge the conflict, point out that you are both caught into it and work collaboratively to resolve it. Ultimately, the conflict is the 'enemy', not your ex.
- **What to say:** *"We seem to be stuck on this issue. Can we agree to revisit it later and move on for now?", "I understand we see this differently. Let's try to find a compromise."*
- **What to avoid:** *"You're impossible to work with!" "Forget it; I'll just make the decisions myself."*

Conclusion

By following these principles, there is a chance that you can turn a potentially volatile situation into a productive discussion.