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## Separated Parents in High Conflict: How to Communicate with Your Child

Separation and high conflict between parents can potentially impact children, often leaving them caught in the middle and struggling to understand and cope with the separation, and with the relationship between their parents. This guide is divided into two parts: the first part is for the *resident parent* (the parent with primary custody), and the second part focuses on the *contact parent* (the parent that has contact with the children).

### How to communicate with your child as the Resident parent

As the resident parent, you may find yourself spending more time with your children, which places you in a position to provide stability and reassurance. It's essential to communicate openly and supportively to help them adjust to their new reality.

#### 1. Communicating about the separation

When explaining the separation, aim to use age-appropriate language. Avoid blame and keep the explanation simple and neutral.

##### Example:

- “Mom and Dad have decided that we will live in different houses. This means you’ll spend some time with each of us, but we both love you very much, and this will never change.”

##### Tips:

- *Avoid blame:* Refrain from casting blame on the other parent. This helps prevent your children from feeling torn or pressured to choose sides.
- *Encourage questions:* Let your children know it’s okay to ask questions and express their feelings.

- *Reassurance*: Reassure your children that they are not the reason for the separation. This is very important because very often children—consciously or unconsciously—feel guilty about their parents’ separation.

## 2. Talking about contact arrangements

It is essential to make the contact arrangements clear and as much predictable as possible. Creating a reliable routine here is of a great importance. Children benefit from knowing when they’ll see the other parent, as this creates a sense of routine and security.

### Example:

- “You’ll be spending the weekend with Dad, and he’ll pick you up from school on Friday. Then you’ll come back here on Sunday evening.”

### Tips:

- *Consistency*: Keep arrangements as consistent as possible and inform your children about any changes well in advance. This cannot be reiterated often enough.
- *Encourage positivity*: Frame the time with the other parent positively. If possible, show enthusiasm about their plans, even if you have mixed feelings. At the same time, refrain from ‘interrogating’ the children what they will do or what they have done with the other parent.

## 3. Managing your feelings about the other parent

Children are very sensitive to tension between their parents. Most likely, they observe and are aware of more than you think. Children often internalise conflicts and may feel responsible for reducing tension, which they could do in different ways, including through misbehaving, developing emotional problems, etc.

### Example:

- “Mom and I don’t always agree on things [no need to hide it; they already know it], but we both want what’s best for you. You don’t have to worry about our disagreements. They are not your fault, and it is for Mum and Dad to sort out.”

### Tips:

- *Model neutrality*: Even if you have negative feelings toward the other parent, keep these to yourself. Instead, adopt a neutral tone.
- *Avoid negative language*: Children may take negative comments about the other parent personally, as it can affect their self-esteem. Such statements slip very easily in our language.

#### 4. Understanding children's feelings and needs

Children may not always express their feelings directly. Signs of stress, anxiety, sadness may show up in their behaviour. They may also misbehave, including when they come back from contact. It is not unusual to take them a day or two to settle when back.

##### Example:

- “It’s absolutely okay to feel sad, confused, or even angry about the changes. You can talk to me about anything, and I’m here to listen.”

##### Tips:

- *Observe behaviour:* Pay attention to changes in mood, sleep, or school performance as these may signal underlying distress. At the same time, do not ‘pathologize’ the children and refer immediately to a mental health professional. Ultimately, it is main responsibility of you and your ex-partner to address these issues with your children.
- *Be supportive:* Encourage your children to talk about their feelings. Remind them that both parents care deeply about them. Children will quickly figure out if you find it difficult to talk on this subject and will refrain from talking to you, in order not to ‘upset’ you.

#### How to communicate with your child as the Contact parent

As the contact parent, it’s essential to make the most of the time you spend with your children. While you may have less frequent contact, your role is still invaluable in maintaining a strong bond. Remember, the quality is more important than the quantity!

##### 1. Communicating about the separation

It can be challenging to explain the separation without placing blame or creating confusion. Aim to reinforce as much as possible what the resident parent has shared while maintaining your unique perspective (children will know that you have a different perspective).

##### Example:

- “Mom and I both love you a lot, and we’re still your family. We just live in separate homes now, and that’s okay. I will always be there for you, and I will always make sure that I spend time with you.”

##### Tips:

- *Avoid conflicting messages:* Work to align with the resident parent’s explanation to avoid confusing your child.

- *Stay positive*: Focus on the positive aspects of spending time together and reassure your children of your love.

## **2. Discussing contact arrangements**

Your children may feel uncertain about the time they spend with you, so creating a predictable and welcoming environment is essential. A couple of hours quality time is much better than a day or two of half-hearted engagement.

### **Example:**

- “I’m excited to see you this weekend! We have some fun activities planned, but let me know if there’s something special you’d like to do.”

### **Tips:**

- *Be punctual and reliable*: Show your children they can rely on you by sticking to the planned arrangements. This is extremely important! I have heard from many children how badly they take it and how they feel let down when the contact parent does not stick with the arrangements.
- *Plan activities together*: Involve your children in planning your time together to make them feel valued and invested in spending time with you.

## **3. Handling feelings about the resident parent**

It is natural to have unresolved emotions about your former partner, but it is crucial to keep these feelings separate from your interactions with your children.

### **Example:**

- “Mom and I may not agree on everything, but we both care about you a lot, and that’s what matters. You may trust us that we are adults, and we can handle and resolve our feelings towards each other”.

### **Tips:**

- *Avoid venting*: Never use your child as a confidant to discuss your frustrations with the other parent. Never insist—consciously or unconsciously—that they take your position.
- *Support their relationship with the resident parent*: Reinforce the importance of their bond with the resident parent to help them feel secure. This includes supporting the boundaries of behaviour that the resident parents sets at home.

## **4. Recognizing children’s unspoken emotions**

Children may try to appear unaffected by the separation, but it is extremely likely that they carry hidden worries or fears.

### Example:

- “It’s okay if you feel sad or worried sometimes. You can always tell me what’s on your mind. I’m here to listen and support you. You can be sure that you are not going to upset me, if you share what you think or how you feel.”

### Tips:

- *Create a safe space:* Let your children know they can share any feelings without fear of judgment.
- *Encourage expression:* Help them find ways to express their emotions, whether through art, play, or talking. Children often communicate unconsciously how they feel through these activities.

## Understanding children’s feelings

Regardless of your role as the resident or as the contact parent, it is potentially helpful to be aware of how children are likely to feel in relation to the separation and in relation to the conflict between you and your ex-partner.

Recognising these can help you develop empathy and a deeper understanding of what your child may potentially be thinking or feeling:

1. **Confusion:** Children often struggle to understand the reason behind the separation and may be confused about the changes in their family structure, especially if explanations are vague or inconsistent.
2. **Guilt:** Children may feel responsible for the separation or conflict, wondering if their actions somehow contributed to the situation, especially if they witness arguments related to parenting styles or contact arrangements. This is very common.
3. **Fear of abandonment:** High-conflict situations can make children worry that one or both parents might leave them. They may fear losing a parent’s love or attention due to loyalty conflicts or seeing one parent less often.
4. **Divided loyalty:** Children often feel torn between parents, sensing that showing love or enjoyment with one parent could hurt or anger the other, which leads to internal conflict and stress.
5. **Loneliness:** Even with both parents in their lives, children may feel isolated, as they may avoid sharing their true feelings for fear of adding to the tension or upsetting their parents. They may or may not share these feelings with their siblings.
6. **Insecurity:** Constant conflict between parents can shake a child’s sense of safety and security, making them anxious about the stability of their family relationships and their own future.
7. **Sadness and loss:** Children often mourn the loss of their family as it once was, missing the familiarity of a united family structure and the daily presence of both parents together. The experience of this loss progress through different stages, like denial, anger, bargaining, low mood, acceptance.

8. **Anger and resentment:** Unresolved feelings of anger may arise, either directed toward one or both parents for causing upheaval or toward themselves, especially if they feel misunderstood or caught in the middle. It is not unusual for children to resolve their feelings by splitting the positive feelings attaching them to one of the parents and attaching their negative feelings towards the other one.
9. **Hopelessness:** When parents continue to clash, children may feel a sense of hopelessness about things ever improving, which can lead to feelings of helplessness and emotional numbness.
10. **Protectiveness:** Some children take on a caretaking role, feeling responsible for one of the parent's well-being, trying to "protect" them from the other parent's perceived hostility or anger. This role reversal can be confusing and burdensome, and damaging in the long run.

By understanding these hidden feelings, parents can work toward validating their children's experiences and creating an emotionally safe environment. Parents may ask children—gently and very tentatively—if they experience any of these. Recognising that children may have complex, unspoken feelings helps parents respond with empathy, even when their child's behaviour is challenging or hard to understand, and even when they feel rejected by the child.