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How to Respond if Your Child Does Not Want to See You

Being a contact parent in a high-conflict situation is challenging, particularly when your child or children express reluctance or refusal to see you. While the situation can feel frustrating and heartbreaking, it is crucial to approach it with patience and focus on the child's well-being.

1. Responding to the child/ children

The child's refusal to see you may stem from various factors, including loyalty conflicts, fear of upsetting the other parent, or sometimes simply from misunderstanding the situation. Regardless of the reasons, your response can go a long way to resolve the situation.

- a) **Stay calm and patient.** It is very important to avoid displaying frustration or hurt when the child expresses reluctance to see you. Say something like, *"I understand that this is hard for you right now. I'm here for you whenever you're ready."* This approach shows you respect their feelings without pressuring them but also that you are there and not abandoning them.
- b) **Validate their feelings.** Acknowledge and empathise with their feelings without jumping to defend yourself. In general, avoid 'defending' yourself and/or trying to convince them that they are 'wrong' about you. Example: *"I can see that you're upset, and it's okay to feel that way. I want to understand how you feel so we can work through this together."*
- c) **Don't take it personally or get 'offended' by your child.** The more they see you that you get upset by their response the more likely is that the reluctance to see you will continue. The more able you are to contain your emotional response, the more reassured they may feel.
- d) **Avoid criticism of the resident parent.** Never criticise or blame the resident parent in front of the child, even if you suspect alienation. This can deepen the child's resistance and create confusion. This is a least helpful response.
- e) **Keep communication open.** Send short, positive messages – when and as agreed – if the child is unwilling to talk or meet. Example: *"I just wanted to say I'm thinking about you and hope you're doing well."*

2. Working on the bond with your child

Building or rebuilding a bond requires consistency, empathy, and intentional effort.

- a) **Show consistency.** Make regular attempts to engage with your child, even if they resist. For example, send birthday cards, small notes, or tokens of affection that demonstrate you are thinking about them. Remember, these are tokens of affection and in no way they should be worded in a way that may invite guilt in the child.
- b) **Engage in child-centred activities.** Suggest activities that the child enjoys or feels comfortable with, such as going to the park, playing a game, or drawing. Inquire about their interests and let them lead the interaction. It is about the bond between you and the child; at this stage, avoid involving other people in your time with the child, e.g. new partner, half-siblings or step siblings, etc.
- c) **Create a safe space to express their feelings.** Reassure the child that they can express themselves without fear of judgment or repercussions. Example: *"You can always tell me what you're thinking, even if it's something hard for me to hear. It is ok to be upset."* Do not respond defensively when they express their feelings.
- d) **Be emotionally present.** Reflect on moments of connection to help the child feel understood and valued.

3. Containing your frustration

High-conflict disputes between parents can evoke feelings of anger, sadness, and helplessness. Managing these emotions is essential for both your well-being and your relationship with your child.

- a) **Practice emotional regulation.** Use techniques like deep breathing, mindfulness, or physical exercise to manage intense emotions. Journaling can also help you process feelings constructively.
- b) **Seek professional support.** Consider therapy or support groups for parents in similar situations. A therapist can help you process frustration and develop coping strategies.
- c) **Focus on the long-term.** Remind yourself that relationships take time to heal. Focus on small, incremental improvements instead of expecting immediate changes. Ultimately, the long-term positive outcomes for your child or children is what is important.
- d) **Set boundaries for conflict.** Avoid engaging in hostile exchanges with the resident parent. This reduces the risk of escalating the situation and indirectly impacting your child.

4. Maximising the chances of reconnection

To rebuild trust and connection, it's important to take proactive steps.

- a) **Maintain a positive narrative.** Talk about your time together in positive terms. Remind the child of enjoyable memories without pressuring them.
Example: *"I was just thinking about the time we went fishing together. That was such a fun day."* Show photographs from past events together.
- b) **Demonstrate reliability.** Always follow through on all your promises. If you say you'll call, visit, or send something, ensure that you do. Show gentle persistence – avoiding at the same time for the child to feel under pressure – in this, even if the child is reluctant to see you and even if this is emotionally taxing for you.
- c) **Consider family therapy.** Suggest joint therapy sessions to provide a neutral space for rebuilding trust and understanding. A trained therapist can facilitate communication.

Ultimately, do not take this personally and do not telegraph your possible frustration with the resident parent to the child. Reassure them that you are their parent and as such 'you are not going anywhere' / not disappearing from their life but that you are also aware that they might need some time to get used to spending time with you again.