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Separated Parents in High Conflict: Survival's Guide

Separated parents often face heightened tensions when dealing with custody and contact disputes, particularly in high-conflict, emotional situations.

This guide offers actionable strategies to manage communication, de-escalate conflicts, and promote constructive communication. The goal is to prioritise the well-being of your child while minimising stress and conflict.

- **Focus on the child's best interests:** Every decision and conversation should be guided by what benefits the child. Try to leave the personal hurt feelings aside when making decisions.
- **Emotional 'detachment' in communication:** Treat interactions as a 'professional or business' exchange, focused solely on logistics and child's needs. In some high-conflict situations, this is the only way to bring a positive outcome.
- **Respectful boundaries:** Respect each other's boundaries to prevent escalation and maintain emotional distance. Communicate with each other only as agreed and using means of communication only as agreed.

1. Positive Communication Techniques: Communication Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- **Use neutral language:** Keep your words factual and avoid emotional or opinion-based statements.
 - *Example:* "Our child's school play is at 6pm on Wednesday" rather than "Make certain you do not forget about the play on Wednesday."
- **Frame requests positively:** Instead of making demands, suggest solutions.
 - *Example:* "Can we try a different pickup time that works better for both of us?" instead of "You never agree with the arrangements that I suggest."
- **Focus on shared goals:** Emphasise the mutual commitment to the child's happiness.
 - *Example:* "I think we both want to ensure they're doing well in school. Let's discuss ways to help."

Do not:

- **Very important: do not use sarcasm or passive-aggressive language:** This escalates tension and invites defensiveness.
 - *Avoid:* "I'm sure you'll remember this time, unlike last week."
- **Don't send messages when angry:** Take a moment to cool off before responding to avoid reactions driven by emotion. As a rule, never respond to messages immediately but give it a reasonable amount of time before responding.

2. De-Escalation Techniques

Pause and breathe:

- **Practice delayed responses:** When a message triggers strong emotions, wait before responding. Use this time to regain calm.
- *Example:* If a comment about your parenting style feels like a provocation, take 15-30 minutes to cool off, focusing on the desired outcome of your response.

Reframe contentious topics:

- **Use "I" Statements** to shift focus from blame to perspective.
- *Example:* "I feel it will benefit our child, if we coordinate on discipline approaches" instead of "You're always too lenient."

Focus on facts over feelings:

- Avoid subjective opinions and keep discussions factual.
- *Example:* "The doctor recommends that we follow up in two weeks" rather than "I think you're not taking this health issue seriously."

Examples of effective de-escalation in texts:

- *Escalating Text:* "You're always so disorganised with drop-offs. Maybe if you actually cared, this wouldn't be so hard for our child."
- *De-Escalated Text:* "It seems drop-off times have been challenging. Would 5pm work better for you? This way, we can help our child transition smoothly."

3. Choosing effective communication channels

a. Written Channels (Email/Texts)

- *Pros:* Offers time to think before responding; creates a record of communication.
- *Best for:* Logistical discussions, planning schedules, and important updates. Written communication via emails and texts is suggested to be used as the main means of communication in situations of high conflict.

Examples of when to Use email vs. texts:

- *Texts:* For quick updates like "Arrived at the handover place" or "Can we switch to Wednesday this week?"
- *Email:* For issues that require more details, such as school plans, changes in custody schedules, or financial discussions.

b. Co-Parenting Apps:

- *Benefits:* Apps like *OurFamilyWizard* or *TalkingParents* allow structured communication, timestamping, and a way to keep track of expenses.
- *Suggested Use:* Establish a pattern of using an app for all logistical and planning messages to prevent emotions from 'seeping' into discussions.

c. Phone calls in emergencies only:

- Use phone calls sparingly, ideally when both parties have agreed on ground rules for phone etiquette. For example, only to be used when something immediate requires attention.
- *Example:* Agree that emergency calls are limited to medical/ urgent school issues or other urgent logistics.

4. Identifying, avoiding and managing triggers

Common triggers to avoid:

- *Blame Statements:* Avoid phrases like “It’s your fault...” or “You always...” as these tend to escalate arguments.
- *Unnecessary Criticisms:* Instead of focusing on the other parent’s personal flaws, keep the focus on immediate logistical needs.

Examples of trigger management:

- *Escalating Comment:* “You always forget to inform me about school activities.”
- *Alternative:* “Could we set up a shared calendar for school events?”

Set boundaries for sensitive topics:

- Pre-agree on ways to discuss potentially sensitive subjects. For example, set a “safe word” for either parent to signal the need to pause a conversation if emotions run high.

Be aware of your personal triggers in the context of your past relationship with the other parent. Remnants of this relationship tend to linger and may be powerful triggers in escalating conflict.

5. Building emotional resilience and healthy boundaries

1. Encouraging ‘parallel parenting’

- *How It helps:* When in high conflict, parallel parenting allows each parent to make decisions independently during their custody time, minimising conflict points.
- *Steps:* Agree in advance on a minimal set of guidelines for each household, such as consistent bedtime, school routines, and healthy eating habits. The rest is to the discretion of each parent.

2. Building emotional resilience for parents

- *Use Professional Support:* Working with a therapist or counsellor can provide parents with coping strategies and neutral support. Avoid if possible, suggesting this for the children! By the end of the day, it parents’ responsibility to create conditions for the children’s emotional wellbeing.
- *Practice Stress Management:* Physical activity, mindfulness practices, and regular relaxation routines can help parents respond to stressors calmly.

Examples of healthy boundaries in communication:

- *Healthy boundaries:* “Let’s use the co-parenting app for all routine scheduling, so we both have a record.”
- *Respect each other’s space:* Important: avoid comments about how the other parent should run their household or personal life.