

# Parenting Pointers - High Conflict Divorce

Divorces are rarely easy and are clearly a lot tougher when there are children. Far too often, the hurt and frustration following a divorce fosters a level of conflict that becomes toxic for the kids. First and foremost, parents need to care more about the welfare of their children than to *win* against a former partner. The research is absolutely clear that kids in high conflict divorces tend to react to the relationship challenges between their parents in one or more of four distinct patterns.

- ❖ Some youngsters *act out* in self-defeating ways (delinquency, alcohol, drugs, sex, runaway, & pregnancy).
- ❖ Others *turn inward* and are likely to be viewed as depressed, perhaps suicidal, isolated or suffering from self-doubt or other internal conflicts.
- ❖ Many kids develop long-term *interpersonal conflicts* (sarcasm, put-downs, arguments, rage, and fights) that are very similar to the conflicts that they observed between their parents.
- ❖ Many other children and teens develop *problems with thought and memory processes* (judgment, poor grades, forgetting & dropping out). Errors in thinking develop as a result of the stress hormones in the brain that become more present in stressful situations, including high conflict divorces.

Parents are urged to consider the following guidelines to promote the healthiest adjustment possible for their children during and after a divorce.

**\* Speak Positively About Your Former Partner.** From an early age, young people hear comments like “you have your mother’s eyes” or “your musical talent must be from your father.” Kids quickly understand that they are a product of their father and mother and that they have characteristics of both of their parents. After a divorce when kids hear comments like, “Your mother is a lazy tramp” or “I can’t believe that I ever married that dishonest jerk,” they also perceive that they may have those same traits because they are “half of their mom and half of their dad.” Solution: you are most kind to your child when focus on the positive in your ex. Saying terrible things about your former partner is the surest way to destroy your child’s self-esteem **and** compromise your relationship with your child. Saying respectful things is more likely to build rapport with your former partner, boost the kids’ self-esteem, and make life feel *safer* for your kid.

**\* Do Your Best To Avoid Court.** While Family Courts increasingly attempt to operate in the ‘best interest of the children,’ the legal process is necessarily adversarial and more designed to identify winners and loser than amicable resolutions. A judge who sees multiple cases each day simply cannot understand the complexities of each family who comes before them. The security and emotional stability of the children are often threatened when a child knows that you are about to go to battle in court. Kids always pick up on the tension in their parents when a court date approaches and they *know* (rightly or wrongly) that they are at the

epicenter of the conflict.

**\* Deal with the Loss.** All divorces are about loss: loss of relationship, finances, hopes, homes, and dreams. High conflict divorces often center on the fears and frustration of losing power, losing a bond with the children, losing an ability to be in control of the future, and losing self-esteem. Here is the paradox. We gain power in working cooperatively. The future is more assured and *safer* when we cooperate rather than conflict.

**\* Be kind to your ex-partner's new partner.** Kids need love and limits, and often benefit from the support of new stepmother or mom's new boyfriend. Be open to the possibility that these new people in your son or daughter's life can provide useful support. Watch out for your own jealousy and understand that no one can replace your role as mom or dad. Having a positive relationship with your ex's new partner can be enormously useful. Having an extra set of eyes on kids as they go through their teen years may be especially valuable.

**\* Don't try to pull the child onto *your side*.** Most children feel a connection to both parents and are especially concerned that they will be loved by both parents after a divorce. Too many parents want to insure that they continue receiving a large part of their child's affection and try to insure this with comments and actions designed to alienate their ex-partner from the children. This strategy very often backfires when the child ultimately recognizes the alienating strategy and distances themselves from the parent who has done this. Far too often, both parents use bribes, comments, hurtful behaviors, and legal roadblocks to create emotional distance between the child and the other parent. The result of this is often a variety of psychiatric conditions, delinquency, depression, school failure, and drug abuse. It is rarely (if ever) a good idea to show the kids court documents, especially if those documents will cast a negative shadow on either parent.

**\* Monitor your frustration.** If a conversation with your partner becomes difficult, it may help to take a step back, drop the volume of your voice, speak more deliberately, and consider postponing the discussion. Please avoid arguments in front of the kids - even on the phone. Please, never touch your former partner.

**\* Think about the impact of your decisions on your kids and former-partner.** Schedule events on your time and negotiate with your former partner on your interest in activities that cross over between both parents. Be certain that the child (or children) is ready to go, in clean clothing when due for a pick up. Avoid discussions of money or other "business" matters at the time of pick-up and please avoid using the children as messengers to your former partner.

**\* Take a "businesslike" approach to dealing with your former partner.** We *get* the idea that you got a divorce because you were not a great fit, but your children's well-being demands that you get along well enough that the kids are not hurt. Adopt a stance where you deal with "just the facts" and not let old emotions control the present situation. Look for win-win compromises that are best for the children even if you sometimes feel like you are giving more than your fair share. You can bet that your former partner sometimes perceives that the result is not perfectly fair for them either.

**\* Inquire, but don't interrogate.** Kids hate it when they perceive that a parent is pumping them for information when they return from a visit - you will likely damage your relationship with your child if they feel pressured to be a 'spy' for you. Be positive about the events that your child enjoyed with your former partner.

**\* Discipline your child on your time.** Unless you've made an agreement to uphold each other's discipline, don't expect that your former partner will uphold a consequence that you've instituted for misconduct. On the other hand, if your son or daughter has just been picked up for shoplifting, a trip to Disneyland isn't a great idea. If it is possible for you to support each other in discipline, go for it, but be certain that the consequences are considered reasonable by both parents. If a stepparent (or significant other) is present in the home, birth parents are usually in the best position to provide boundaries and consequences.

**\* Communicate, be dependable, be responsible.** Determine the best way to communicate with your former partner - consider the phone, texting, email, etc. Keep the lines of communication open. If there are changes in your plans for your time with the children, communicate with your ex and the children giving them as much advanced notice as possible. Let your ex know about school events, medical appointments, or other activities in your child's life. Be on time with child support and for scheduled pickups and drop-offs. Return the kids in clean clothing and be certain that homework is complete.

**\* Be considerate.** Speak to your former partner in a fully respectful manner. If words like "crazy" or "sick" are used to describe your former partner, you'll limit your ability to co-parent and will likely compromise your relationship with your child. Be certain to call before coming to your former partner's home and never come unannounced.

**\* When you disagree** with your former partner, share your concerns out of earshot of your children. If the discussion is apt to be difficult, walk away rather than have a verbal conflict in front of your son or daughter. Parental anger is toxic for kids!

**\* When you start to date,** recognize that your daughter or son's security may become threatened. Be aware of their anxiety, fear, or anger and be ready to talk about it. Early teens may be especially touchy about your intimacy with a new relationship - proceed with sensitivity and caution. It is often better to wait for a stable and serious relationship before introducing them to the kids.

**\* Take a careful look at yourself, please!** Problems in marriages are often transferred to the kids after a divorce. Sometimes divorces happen when one or both partners have problems that they failed to address (substance abuse, rage, irresponsibility), sometimes the divorce is about challenges that are *between* the partners (communication, different values, cultural issues), and sometimes it is a combination of both. The same problems that hurt the marriage are apt to hurt the children when the kids become the only *joint* between the two parties. It may be hard to admit to your own difficulties, but it will be harder to address the resulting legal, psychiatric, vocational, and educational problems if you don't. Take responsibility for your own life and the decisions that you make. It is tempting to point the finger of blame at the other parent, but it isn't

helpful. We each must be 100% responsible for our lives and decisions.

**\* Use a court-appointed parenting coordinator or mediator** if you can't amicably work with your ex-partner to address the differences between the two of you. There is a cost to obtain a PC or mediator, but it is typically far less than the expense of multiple court appearances and far less expensive than the damage to your son or daughter if the challenges continue.

*"Understand that you have a clear choice about your son or daughter's emotional well-being."*

Mark Rohde, Ph.D.