



Conflict Resolution Guidelines for Co-Parents

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In relationships, addressing areas of concern can facilitate understanding. When conflict is handled appropriately, both parents feel safe expressing their true feelings. Conflict can be destructive if it is used to attack or manipulate the other person. The way in which conflict is handled is more important than the subject of the disagreement. If either party has to “win” in order for the conflict to be settled, a power struggle will develop and nothing will be resolved. Sometimes couples settle a disagreement by agreeing to disagree, realizing that there are two different personalities and styles involved.

Guidelines for Handling Conflict in a Healthy Way

- Identify the core issue.

Try to figure out the true source of the conflict. Co-parents often argue about superficial matters because dealing with the real issues is too scary. Be specific with your co-parent about what is really making you upset and avoid vague or irrelevant statements.

- Avoid “you” statements.

“You” statements put the focus on the other person’s behavior rather than on your feelings. These statements can be interpreted as shaming and blaming, causing the argument to escalate. “I” messages are a healthier way of saying what you feel without attacking the other person. An “I” message addresses the offending behavior, but the focus is on how you feel about it.

- Listen carefully.

Try to appreciate the other person’s point of view even if you don’t agree. Avoid misunderstandings by restating what you think your co-parent said so he or she can clarify the situation if necessary.

- Stick to the subject at hand and keep it in the present.

Don’t sidetrack the conflict by attacking each other in order to avoid the real issues. Bringing up highly sensitive issues that have nothing to do with the current situation will only escalate the argument. Avoid bringing up past history that is irrelevant to the current conflict.

- Avoid yelling or screaming.

Approach disagreements as calmly as possible. When you’re out of control, the other person isn’t likely to listen to what you have to say. If your co-parent becomes verbally abusive, end the discussion and tell him or her you will continue it under more appropriate circumstances. If the other party becomes physically threatening, exit the situation cautiously and call your local domestic violence center for assistance.

- *Don't run away.*

Don't leave in the middle of an argument unless it becomes too "hot" to deal with effectively. An unfinished argument will be even more difficult to resolve later. If you have to postpone the argument, set a time to resume within twenty-four hours. If the disagreement gets hot again, set another time to have the discussion. Ignoring the other person or refusing to talk is another form of "running away" from conflict.

- *Keep others out of the conflict. Avoid fighting in front of others.*

Conflict should be just between you and your co-parent. Arguments in front of other people are seldom resolved successfully. This includes family and friends. Public conflict only elicits defensiveness and hostility which can cause the argument to escalate. Even when conflict is not in the physical presence of others, their opinions should be left out of the disagreement. The best solution is one that's right for the two of you, regardless of what others think.

- *Avoid saving up resentment.*

Deal with conflict often enough to avoid big blowups. Dealing with problems as they surface keeps anger from causing physical symptoms or building to the exploding point. If the area of disagreement is bothering you, it's worth talking to your co-parent about—no matter how trivial it may seem.

- *No emotional blackmail.*

Avoid statements such as: "If you really loved the children. . ." or "I'm not going to talk to you if you don't. . ." Such statements are manipulative. Positive conflict resolution doesn't mean that you always get your way nor does it mean that you always give in to your co-parent. It's unhealthy to respond to conflict by withholding until the other party complies.

- *Maintain a sense of humor.*

Humor can ease the tension and break deadlocks in communication and conflict. However, be sure you don't use humor to put your co-parent down or as a means of avoiding the issues at hand. Sarcasm is often presented as humor but actually is an expression of anger that is always inappropriate, especially in conflict resolution.

- *Timing is important.*

Dealing with conflict when you're tired, rushed or angry is not constructive. Pick a time when both of you are cool, rested and not rushed. Sometimes it's helpful to set a time limit for conflict discussion. Any session over an hour in length usually begins to lose its effectiveness. After an hour, it's best to call it quits and set another time to resume no more than 24 hours later.