

High Conflict Intervention Program

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How to “Ex” Communicate

In a breakup or divorce with children, there may often be high emotion and tension between the parents. This tension creates anxiety for the children as well as the parents. The children sense their parent’s anxiety in their voice, their body language and in their parent’s behavior.

To significantly reduce or entirely eliminate the anxiety for all of the family the parents should follow two simple rules for the first two years, in order to control the communication and contact between the parents. Even if a parent believes that there may be no reason to expect tension between the parents, the rules are designed to eliminate potential problems. The rules are as follows:

Number one: Eliminate all face-to-face communication between the parents (including telephone contact), for a minimum of two years.

Number two: All communication should be done in writing, using a memo format to communicate.

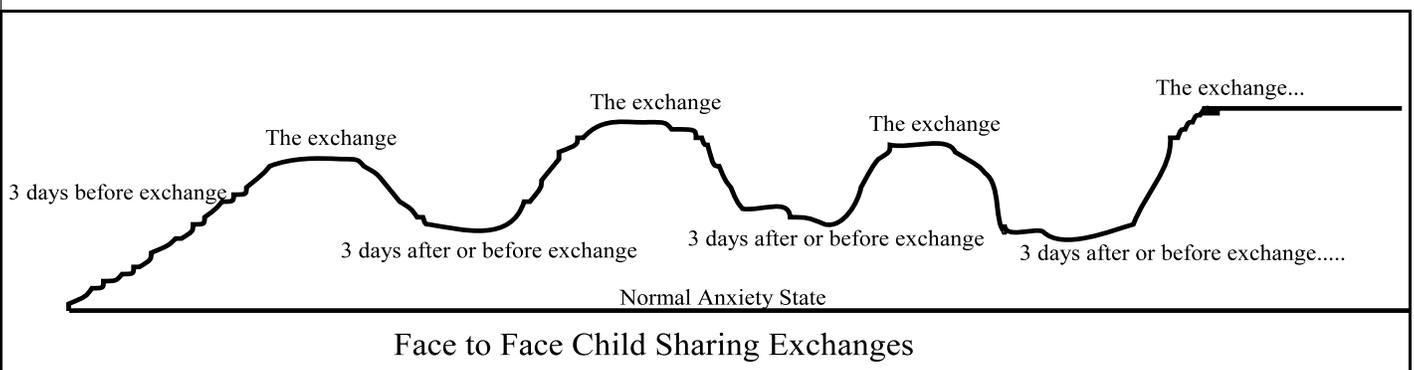
Research shows that constant and chronic conflict between the parents negatively impacts the children. If the parents believe they can get along with each other after the couple of years after the breakup, they may want to relax the rules somewhat. At the first sign of tension or conflict however, they should immediately go back to following the rules which are recommended

Children will do anything to please their parents. A child’s primary attachment and sense of security has been to have both parents love.

We are all like vulnerable animals, because our “survival instinct” keeps us alive. While in the womb and until we were about six years old, we all learned to read our parent’s looks and feelings of anger, nervousness and joy. As babies, we learned to read our parent’s vibes. All children know subconsciously when their parents are upset and when they are feeling good. When a parent is worried, upset or unsure of themselves, the child will react with anxiety too. This is how our basic anxiety states are formed. The more anxious a parent is during our childhood, the more opportunity we have for being wired and sensitive to anxiety. Children attach “life and death security” to both parents. This security is as if both parents are a single entity.

Unless the parent(s) learn to create new bonds with the children, when the family breaks up the bond they had established from birth is broken and destroyed. The bond the children had during the marriage was both parents as a single unit, now the parents are no longer together, the bond is severed. This bond can’t be divided like the furniture in a house would be divided in a divorce.

When parents are in conflict, the children are constantly feeling unsafe and disconnected from their parents. Parents at war remain in heightened anxiety states all of the time. They are unable to nurture or reassure their



to protect the children from being caught in the conflict.

When parents split up, the children want to be able to still be with and freely love both of their parents. They want to feel loved by both of their parents too.

children that everything will turn out “ok.” The children begin to feel disconnected from school and their friends, often experiencing depression, loneliness and isolation. The children become more and more isolated from their world and they become more and more afraid. They feel

unsafe about their world. The parent's focus is on battling the "ex," for the sake of the children when ironically, they become invisible to the parents as the battle over them continues.

When these parents have chronic conflict, one of the things that happens to them is that they become preoccupied with what may or may not happen to them during exchanges with the other parent. The parents become emotionally charged by what the other parent says or does. Their anxiety level is raised because of all the unresolved marital issues they never solved.

Anytime a parent has visual or vocal contact or communication with the other parent, their anxiety level goes up. Relationships that end, aren't resolved when the couple breakups up. Instead, it is like there is a computer always running in their heads. The computer has a giant folder, which includes all of the files containing every argument the couple ever had, and every negative memory and failed attempt to settle the problems during that relationship's life.

After the breakup, the file continues to run. The file never really gets deleted. Every time the couple sees or hears the other person, that file comes up and runs at full speed. The file replays the failures and the feelings over and over again. This creates an anxiety state in which the experience of failing and being vulnerable takes charge, while the rational mind takes a backseat. When a couple can eliminate contact and communication for a minimum of two years, they are able to reduce the vocal and visual cues that set the file in motion. Years after the breakup, the couple will not react with as much anxiety if they have kept contact to a minimum.

This file and the anxiety state continues to run approximately 72 hours after the contact occurred. Approximately three days prior to an exchange or interchange with the parents, the person also starts getting worked up. They begin to negatively anticipate the interaction with the other parent. Most often they are not aware what is going on inside their minds and bodies, however, once they realize what contact and communication can do, they recognize that this is happening to them.

These unresolved arguments, and the negative file we have stored will never be resolved. It is part of our wiring to rehearse old arguments and scripts inside our heads even if we are unaware of what we are doing. This gets us more and more worked up as we approach the exchange we are now dreading.

After any exchange, it usually takes the mind and body, the psyche approximately another 24-72 hours to calm down from.

If there are several exchanges a week between the parents, they never has a chance to calm down.

The chart below shows what happens to an individual who has frequent contact and communication with the other parent.

Difficulty Breaking up

The definition of high conflict is that one or both of the parents involved in the conflict are unable or unwilling to end their marital relationship.

These parents have tremendous difficulty with the breakup, which increases their also anxiety state. The parent who can't let go feels that they must have constant contact with the other parent. They are invested in keeping themselves apprised of the other parent's doings and behavior. They insist they must constantly be with the other parent and/or the children. It is fear that drives them to stay in contact and communication with the other parent, and fear that keeps them involved in the fight for their children. The contact continues to accelerate and the result is conflict.

When one parent pushes for any kind of interaction, the other parent may fight back, by getting angry or feeling suffocated. They may try numerous ways to get that parent to leave them alone. Often one of the parents is unaware that they efforts to involve the parent in cooperation and communicate with the "ex" actually continues the conflict too. This keeps both of the parents at higher and higher levels of anxiety, which keeps the children in an anxiety and isolated state too. The children often become emotionally disconnected from their parents. When a parent is in an anxiety state, they are unable to focus on the children's needs, because they are in a fight or flight state of mind, and because they are preoccupied with the next fight or interaction, they are not able to nurture their children. And as long as the parents are communicating with each other, face to face, verbally or with unnecessary writing, the anxiety state continues to remains heightened.

Every interaction or contact with the other parent keeps the parents charged with adrenalin. The parent's ability to concentrate becomes scattered, while their focus is narrowed. They become like a trembling animal in the corner awaiting their fate. As their anxiety state continues their breathing becomes shallow, while their nerve endings become sensitized to the slightest charge of anxiety. The ringing of the telephone (anticipating the "ex" calling), can even send them into orbit. The anxiety state is running day and night, it affects the parent's ability to

emotionally connect with their children to nurture them and make them feel secure.

The children begin to suffer the effects of the parents at war. These effects can have a permanent impact in their own relationships in the future. Many children end up permanently feeling isolated, plastic or lost as adults.

When parents begin to calm down the children calm down. The good news is that it only takes one parent to end the conflict.

Rule number one:

1. DO NOT HAVE FACE TO FACE

EXCHANGES. Have child exchanges occur at school or day care. One parent can drop the children off, while the other picks up. Parent should build in a transition time for the children between drop off and pick up times. This is a short time span of one hour or more in which the children are exchanged between parents. As the gap between parents grows wider because of changes in both households as they adjust to the new way of life, the child will need to learn the differences and the rules for each household.

This time between exchanges actually allows the children to emotionally and mentally transition between the different homes. One of the easiest transition times is drop off at school in the morning by one parent and the other parent picks them up at the end of the school day. The time in between is school day and transition naturally occurs. Children involved in conflict need down time to calm down from one home where there may be more stimulation than the other home. Planning activities for children that are quiet, puzzle, play dough, bath time, a small snack and story are all activities for young children that help them calm down and adjust to the home they are currently in.

MAKE SURE PARENTS HAVE A CLEARLY DEFINED CHILD SHARING PLAN, which includes specifically defined drop off and pick up times, including holiday exchanges, handling of emergencies for notifying the other parent, and any agreements for changes in the child sharing schedules. The clearer your child sharing arrangement, the less parents need to communicate each other.

Conflict=Contact and/or Communication

Conflict results when parents have any form of communication or contact with each other. The more frequent the contact and communication the more frequent the conflict.

Conflict also results from child sharing arrangements that are too loose (where parents have to talk with each other to determine the schedule, etc . . .) and when one or both of the parents do not follow the court order.

Words in children sharing agreements such as "Reasonable Visitation." are trouble. One parent can unilaterally decide what is or not reasonable for them and can eliminate the other parents child sharing time completely.

Children need structure and order. Even if a work schedule is erratic, it is important for the parents to set up some regular times per week to have the children without altering the schedule.

The tighter your child sharing plan is, the less you have to talk to each other. It usually takes about two years before everyone is settled down into a new routine. If there is ongoing conflict, face to face exchanges, and verbal communication between the parents, the children will continue to suffer. The anxiety graph shows that the tension level for people in divorce is already above the normal anxiety line. If the parents are having continuing contact with each other, their anxiety will never drop down into the normal range. Every telephone call, every face to face exchange increases the anxiety level, even if a parent doesn't recognize that it is happening, the people around them do. Their focus has become narrowed. They are in survival mode, ready to spring at any moment into an attack or run. It is normal for people the first few years to be stressed, scared and anxious, but healing can't even begin until the conflict has been significantly reduced or ended.

Anxiety is running in both the body and mind. It is a program that is running in the back of the mind even if the person is unaware of it.

3. DO ALL OF YOUR COMMUNICATION IN WRITING. Send written communication through email, fax, or the US Mail, don't pass notes through the children or send verbal messages through the kids to each other.

4. FOLLOW THE 'JUST THE FACTS MA'AM' RULE. After you have clearly defined the child sharing agreement for the children, you no longer will have much to communicate over. With doctor appointments and open houses, an occasional note can be sent back and forth. All communication should be done in note form. When sending a note, stick to the facts, only. Write one topic per note. If you have three topics to write about, write three separate notes. Notes should be just that, notes. Notes are one to four sentences in length. They state just the facts necessary to proceed, based upon the information. Any information that is unnecessary should be eliminated. Below are examples of appropriate notes:

BY EMAIL OR US MAIL

A DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT NOTE:

February 6,

John:

I took Johnnie to Dr. Morris today. He has an ear infection. He needs one tsp. of Amoxicillin four times a day, keep refrigerated. He has had two doses, last one at 1:00 p.m. I left the medicine in the Day Care refrigerator.

Jeralyn

A NOTE ABOUT VACATION:

March 26,

Jeralyn:

I plan to take the children on vacation to NY this summer from June 25-31. Let me know if this is convenient, by May 1. I will provide you with flight info. after you confirm.

John

A NOTE ABOUT MONEY:

December 12,

John:

Enclosed please find the bill for Jasmine's glasses. I paid entire amount, please reimburse me 1/2.

Jeralyn

A NOTE ABOUT A CHANGE IN CHILD SHARING SCHEDULE IF THE COUPLE CAN AGREE ON SOME CHANGES IN SCHEDULED TIMES

Sept 28,

Jeralyn:

I have an open house at the school Wednesday, Oct. 12. I would like to exchange Tuesday 11 for the 12 with same exchange times, ... Confirm by Oct. 1.

John

All of these notes are necessary. They relate to safety and well being of the children, or exchange times for parents based upon need. The note for medicine can be wrapped around the bottle of medicine and handed to the parent at the exchange by the child care provider, or in a diaper bag. There is no unnecessary information in these notes.

4. DON'T ALTER THE CHILD SHARING SCHEDULE. Remain vigilant about keeping the child sharing schedule the same. Change it only if there is a true emergency or an appointment that you must attend for your job or for health reasons. For example, in the note above addressed Sept 28, as a teacher, John has an Open House twice a year, he must attend. Jeralyn knows this, and she and John pre-arrange that week

with each other. The children are told in advance that dad will come on Tues. instead of Wed. evening.

It may not seem like it is a big deal to change the schedule with the other parent here and there, but the minute there is a change in the schedule, an invitation for conflict may be extended. Even little changes may bring about much confusion. People in high conflict breakups often make frequent changes to their child sharing schedule, these changes may seem minor but they involve communication and contact, which usually results in heightened anxiety or conflict.

Every schedule change time requires that you communicate, every communication with each other can lead to conflict. Receiving frequent notes or letters, unnecessary faxes, emails or lengthy journals from the other parent can raise the anxiety level just as quickly as actually seeing each other face to face.

Schedule changes should only be made when an inflexible appointment or emergency actually alters the parent's ability to child share. Going out with friends, or taking a class for fun cannot be considered a good excuse for changing the schedule. Parents who are students may need to modify their child sharing schedules every semester, but not weekly.

Establishing regular contact with the children at regular times gives the children a clear and loving message that you care about them and you want them to succeed.

5. DON'T SEND NOTES THAT INFLAME THE OTHER PARENT. Sending too much information back and forth can actually create problems. Journals often become a source of irritation. Lengthy statements and lost pages create conflict. Negative, demanding or derogatory notes inflame the conflict. Notes telling the other parent how to raise the children are seen as dictatorial and controlling.

6. PARALLEL PARENT RATHER THAN CO-PARENT. Parallel parenting is described as both sets of parents parenting the children their own way. They do not discuss their parenting decisions with the other parent. Communication is kept to a minimum. Interaction between the parents is limited. Face to face exchanges are eliminated or reduced. Parents do not write each other and discuss the daily events of the children. Parallel parenting should last for at least two years, sometimes it should be longer. The higher the conflict between the couple, the more important it is to parent separately with the children. Co-parenting can occur when the conflict dies down. If conflict continues, the conflict never dies down, and co-parenting won't work.

Often parents are confused about the definition of joint legal custody. They interpret it to mean that every little decision about the children must be discussed with the other parent before taking action. For example, they think that they must get permission from the other parent

before taking the child to the doctor, or perhaps even to make the doctor's appointment. Team Works provides a definition for legal custody to its readers, "*The parents shall share **Joint Legal Custody** of their child(ren). This means that each parent shall have the duty to consult with the other on the major decisions affecting the lives of their child(ren) regardless of which parent has physical custody. This includes but is not limited to, primary, secondary and post-secondary education, religious training, summer camp, health, dental and psychological care. An exception is an emergency situation where prior consultation is not practical. Each parent shall do his/her best to maintain access between the child(ren) and the other parent, and to encourage the child(ren)'s natural feelings of love, affection and respect for the other parent.*

Both parents shall inform the other parent of any major decisions for the children that relate to health, education or welfare of the children. One parent does not have to get approval from the other parent every time they take the children to the doctor. Sending a note after the doctor's appointment is usually appropriate. Invite the other parent to take the child to the doctor, or arranging for the parents to take children on alternate visits. This can all be agreed upon in advance.

7. DO NOT COMMUNICATE BY TELEPHONE, UNLESS IT IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.

By talking on the telephone, there is a danger that children will overhear what you say to each other. Children are intensely curious and often want to know what is happening, as it related to them. If one parent is hurt and angry, the children often will go to the other parent's home and confront that parent for hurting the other parent.

If you don't talk, you don't have to put your children through these problems. If you don't talk, you don't get triggered to feel guilty, or to say angry or inflammatory statements. (An emergency message because the child is in the hospital would be an exception to telephone contact rule.)

Talking on the telephone creates anxiety for the children and the parents. Parents listen through negative filters about the other parent. The other parent's tone of voice can send that parent over the edge. Children read all of these emotional messages. They get caught between trying to keep peace between the two of you, and taking sides. Don't give children a reason to take sides, or end up permanently wounded.

Even if you can no longer find any love or positive qualities about your "ex" partner, your children do not feel the same way. All children want to hear that they were conceived in love by both of you and they want to feel good about themselves, being a

part of mom and a part of dad. Bad mouthing the other parent in front of the children divides their loyalty, undermines their self esteem and endangers their ability to feel loved by their parents.

If one parent has difficulty letting go of the conflict, and continues to contact you, write a note to them saying, "From this point on, all communication shall be in writing to protect our children. Any telephone contact made will be tape recorded, and all notes will be copied." This puts the other parent on notice that you are serious about the rules and you may need to use this information as documentation for court orders, if they continue to create conflict. Documentation is essential to get that protection. Keep all documentation in a file, fill out information about time sharing on calendars and keep in a safe place.

8. FOLLOW ALL COURT ORDERS, TO THE LETTER. Do not vary from the court order, at all. Any time the court order is even slightly changed by one or both parents, there is usually conflict. Parents who try to keep peace, will accommodate a change in a holiday schedule, or agree to change the schedule for a special day. This usually always results in some form of conflict. One parent may feel short-changed because the change altered the schedule for them or there are frequent exceptions to the routine, leading one parent to feel pressured to accommodate the other. To reduce conflict, don't change any portion of the child sharing agreement! Stick to the court order, until you can make agreed upon changes that you both will sign and file with the courts, as a new court order, then you can enforce this and follow the new plan.

Often the conflict has been going on so long it may seem like an impossible task to end it. However, by applying the rules in this article, the conflict can become more manageable. It is much easier to determine who it is that is still having difficulty ending the conflict, if they keep breaking the rules.