

Parenting After Separation

Parents' Guide for Families in High Conflict



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Who to Call

Family Justice Services (FJS) provides services to parents dealing with the difficulties of family breakdown, separation and divorce in the healthiest way possible. Services are provided by court direction, legislative mandate, or voluntary participation. The following areas operate under the direction of the executive director, director and assistant director.

A. Maintenance Enforcement Office (MEO)

The Maintenance Enforcement Office:

- registers child and spousal support orders and agreements;
- records and monitors support payments; and
- takes enforcement action when the required payments are missed or late.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-8961

Toll-free: 1-866-229-9712

Email: meoinquiry@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/child-support/paying-and-receiving-child-support>

B. Inter-jurisdictional Support Orders (ISO) Unit

The ISO Unit assists individuals in:

- applying for child support or changes to child support where the other parent resides outside Saskatchewan;
- arranging for registration of the applicant's order or agreement in the other jurisdiction; and
- working with the other maintenance enforcement program to collect payments.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-8961

Toll-free: 1-866-229-9712

Email: iso.inquiry@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/child-support/general-information-on-child-support/parents-living-outside-saskatchewan>

C. Social Work Unit (SWU – offices in both Regina and Saskatoon)

The SWU:

- conducts parenting, parenting time and children's voices assessments for the Court of King's Bench;
- provides parent education; and
- arranges for either supervised parenting time by court order or the exchange of children upon receipt of a court order or written request from both parents.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-9416

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/directory?ou=5c03449d-2519-41af-80f6-c47beb3ac099>

D. Marriage Unit (MU)

The MU administers legal requirements for marriage. This includes:

- establishing the criteria and authorizing individuals who are appointed as marriage commissioners for performing marriages in Saskatchewan;
- authorizing marriage license issuers;
- selling marriage licenses and providing support to retailers who are authorized to sell marriage licenses; and
- maintaining a current list of approved marriage commissioners and marriage license issuers.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-3869

Email: marriageunit@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/directory?ou=edfea921-1c79-422f-bc89-f95182cda37f>

E. Family Law Information Centre (FLIC)

FLIC provides:

- information on family law, such as support, parenting, and property division;
- information on court procedures and legal service options;
- assistance with locating and filling out court forms;
- assistance with court documentation and processes for family law matters;
- referrals to other community legal resources; and
- specialized self-help kits for court applications and family law videos on various topics, including finances during separation, child support, spousal relationships and their breakdown, options for resolving disputes, parenting arrangements, dividing family property, and family violence.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-5837

Toll-free: 1-888-218-2822 (extension 2)

Email: familylaw@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/separation-or-divorce/represent-yourself-in-family-court>

F. Child Support Recalculation Services (CSRS)

The CSRS service:

- can recalculate child support payments if there is a court order or agreement that meets the eligibility requirements;
- allows either the recipient or payor to apply with an application form and a copy of their court order or agreement;
- allows individuals to apply for a recalculation after a period of six months following the most current court order, agreement, or recalculation decision; and
- is free and an alternative to going to court.

Contact:

Phone: (306) 787-5402

Toll-free: 1-833-825-1445

Email: recalculation@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/family-and-social-support/child-support/child-support-recalculation-service>

Other Resources Include:

G. Dispute Resolution Office (DRO)

DRO provides:

- mediation services to families experiencing separation;
- assistance with defining issues and evaluating options for items such as property division and parenting plans; and
- training and workshops in conflict resolution.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-5747

Toll-free: 1-866-257-0927

Email: drofamily@gov.sk.ca (family programs) | dispute.resolution@gov.sk.ca (general and workshops)

Website: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/separation-or-divorce/early-family-dispute-resolution/family-mediation>

H. Family Matters Program (FMP)

FMP provides:

- information, resources and referrals to deal with a changing family situation; and
- assistance to resolve urgent and outstanding issues.

Contact:

Toll-free: 1-888-863-3408

Email: familymatters@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/separation-or-divorce/family-matters-program#further-information>

I. Early Family Dispute Resolution (EFDR) Office

In Saskatchewan, all family law matters in family court must attempt a family dispute resolution process before continuing with further court proceedings. EFDR options include:

- family mediation;
- collaborative law;
- parenting coordination; and
- family arbitration.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-0439

Toll-free: 1-833-787-0439

Email: earlyfamilyresolution@gov.sk.ca

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/separation-or-divorce/early-family-dispute-resolution>

Other Information Sources Related To Family Law:

J. Public Legal Education Association of Saskatchewan (PLEA):

PLEA helps the public by providing general legal information, resources and options for obtaining legal advice. PLEA can also help people:

- satisfy a general interest in the law;
- become familiar with areas of the law that most affect them;
- make use of legal resources available in the community; and
- learn about laws specific to Saskatchewan and Canada.

Contact:

Phone: 306-653-1868 (option 3)

Email: plea@plea.org

<https://www.plea.org/>

K. Family Law Society

The Family Law Saskatchewan website is designed for Saskatchewan courts and self-represented individuals who are experiencing separation or divorce. Here you will find detailed legal information to help navigate a separation or divorce and everything that follows, from background information to a form wizard that can assist in the preparation of required court forms free of charge.

Contact:

<https://familylaw.plea.org>

L. Searching for a private Mediator (fee for service):

Conflict Resolution Saskatchewan Inc.

Contact:

<https://conflictresolutionsk.ca>

Alternative Dispute Resolution Institute of Saskatchewan (ADR Institute of Saskatchewan)

Contact:

Toll-free: 1-866-596-7275

Email: info@adrsaskatchewan.ca

<https://www.adrsaskatchewan.ca>

M. Mental Health and Addictions Services in Saskatchewan:

Click on the website below, then "Find Mental Health and Addictions Services in My Community" and "Directory of Mental Health and Addictions Services in Saskatchewan, April 2018."

Contact:

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/accessing-health-care-services/mental-health-and-addictions-support-services>

N. Ministry of Social Services for Saskatchewan:

The website offers information on programs and services that are available in Saskatchewan.

Contact:

Phone: 306-787-3700

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/government-structure/ministries/social-services>

O. Collaborative Professionals of Saskatchewan Inc.: Collaborative Family Law:

Search for collaborative family law lawyers in your area.

Contact:

<https://collabsask.com>

P. Saskatchewan Law Libraries:

The website for the Law Society of Saskatchewan's Legal Resources Library:

<https://www.lawsociety.sk.ca/legal-resources-library/>

The website for the Saskatchewan Access to Legal Information (SALI) Project through the University of Saskatchewan, College of Law, CREATE Justice: <https://www.usask.ca/createjustice/projects/Saskatchewan-Access-to%20Legal-Information.php>

Q. Finding a Lawyer in Saskatchewan:

Through the Law Society of Saskatchewan's website, click on the "Public" drop-down feature in the top right, then "Finding a Lawyer."

Contact:

<https://www.lawsociety.sk.ca>

R. Legal Aid Saskatchewan:

If you need to make an application for Legal Aid, call the Application Centre at the toll-free number below.

Contact:

Toll-free: 1-800-667-3764

<https://www.legalaid.sk.ca>

S. Pro Bono Law Saskatchewan:

A non-profit, non-government organization that provides free legal advice to low-income clients in Saskatchewan.

Contact:

Phone: 306-569-3098

Toll-free: 1-855-833-7257

<https://www.pblsk.ca>

T. Saskatchewan Law Courts:

Information regarding court dates at the various court locations in Saskatchewan.

Contact:

<https://sasklawcourts.ca>

Interpersonal Violence and Abuse:

U. Emergency Intervention Orders

Emergency intervention orders can be applied to provide safety when a family member is abusive. The police or victim services workers can assist with your application.

Victim Services:

Phone: 306-777-8660 (Regina Victim Services; Regina Police Services)

Phone: 306-975-8400 (Saskatoon Victim Services; Saskatoon Police Services)

For a list of Victim Services units and agencies in Saskatchewan, visit:

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/victims-of-crime-and-abuse/help-from-victim-service-units-and-agencies>

Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS):

PATHS's mission is to support and collaborate with member agencies and others to address, prevent and eliminate intimate partner and family violence. For a list of emergency shelters in Saskatchewan, visit the website and click "Getting Help Now."

<https://pathssk.org>

The Public Legal Education Association of Saskatchewan (PLEA) Safety Planning Tool:

The information PLEA provides is about laws specific to Saskatchewan and Canada. PLEA's Safety Planning Tool is designed to help people dealing with violent relationships by providing them with strategies to increase their safety. By answering anonymous and confidential questions about their situations, people can create a safety plan specific to their situation and their needs.

<https://www.plea.org>

The Domestic Violence Safety Plan Fillable Worksheet:

This resource can be accessed and downloaded at <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/87857>.

For a list of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Programs:

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/justice-crime-and-the-law/victims-of-crime-and-abuse/interpersonal-violence-and-abuse-programs>

V. Other important numbers:

- Regina Police Service: 306-777-6500
- Saskatoon Police Service: 306-975-8300
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP): find a detachment at <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/detach/en>
- Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-387-KIDS
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868
- Canadian Centre for Child Protection: <https://www.protectchildren.ca/en>

Introduction

Parenting After Separation for Families in High Conflict (PASHC) is a three-hour course offered by Saskatchewan Family Justice Services for parents and guardians who characterize their separation and divorce as high conflict. This course is an addition to the Parenting After Separation course that emphasizes the need for parents to work together to raise their children after separation. For some families, the level of conflict between parents makes communication difficult or impossible. Other parents may experience periods of high conflict alternating with times when things go smoothly. **High levels of conflict between parents will always negatively affect the children.**

Although each high conflict situation is unique, some common elements are:

- **Every topic is a potential source of conflict:** Sometimes it doesn't matter what the parents are dealing with, they cannot discuss an issue without it turning into an argument or fight.
- **There may be safety issues:** There may be either a history of violence in the family or someone's mental health, addictions or other factors may be putting someone at risk.
- **There may be extensive court involvement:** Sometimes the only way parents can get things decided is through a court application. However, court orders rarely please everyone, so parents may continually return to court.
- **Conflict revolves around the same issues time and again:** There seems to be no way to resolve some issues, and parents find themselves in the same arguments over and over again.
- **The conflict has been going on for years:** Some level of conflict is often present when parents first separate, but it normally reduces in time. In some high conflict situations, parents have been apart for three or more years and still fight.

This course is divided into six sections that will help you in the following ways:

- **Section 1: How is it Working?**
This section will help you understand the toll conflict takes on you and your children.
- **Section 2: Protecting Your Children**
This section will identify important ways to protect your children from the toxic stress brought on by high conflict.
- **Section 3: Managing Emotions**
This section will show how emotions play out in high conflict situations and how patterns of behavior keep conflict going.
- **Section 4: Setting Boundaries**
This section will show practical steps for putting boundaries in place and making them stick to reduce conflict.
- **Section 5: Parallel Parenting Plans**
Parallel parenting plans are key to managing conflict with the other parent. This section will help you protect your child from conflict by teaching you how to either develop or modify a parallel parenting plan.
- **Section 6: Making it Work**
This section will put it all together by providing you with some conflict reducing strategies you can start using today.

Reducing conflict takes energy and commitment, and it isn't always easy. While this course does not have answers that will completely eliminate conflict, it does provide knowledge and ideas you can use to try to reduce conflict and start a new, more peaceful life for you and your children.

Sources of Information and Expertise

The 2013 PASHC curriculum was revised and adapted by Marsh Kline Pruett, Ph.D from the original PASHC curriculum developed by Family Justice Services in Alberta in 2009. Oversight and approval for the PASHC revision was provided by the PAS Provincial Steering Committee. Funding for revisions was provided by the Norlien Foundation Inc. with administrative oversight generously provided by Alisha Devji. This manual was further revised and adapted from the Government of Alberta's Parenting After Separation (PAS) course in September 2022.

PAS Alberta Steering Committee

Justice Donna C. Read	Gordon Andreiuk	Yogesh Gupta	Bernice Rawes
Judge Todd LaRochelle	Frances Amery	Lisa Lindquist	Jennifer Wells

Recognition and thank you for contributions from:

Diane Shearer	Fred Sudfeld	Kathy Hutchings	Tony Richard
Sandra Fenton	Ken Hoag	Colleen Nicholls	Marilyn Slawinsky
Heidi Machl	Karen Nielson	Raelene Linehan	Chris Dylke
Jeannine Crofton	Nora Deisman	Natalie Tymchuk	Erika Keeler

Section 1 – How is it Working



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- the day-to-day experience of high conflict for parents;
- the day-to-day experience of high conflict for children;
- the benefits of reducing conflict in your life; and
- change begins with you.

What would life be like without this conflict?

Living in high conflict family situations takes a toll on every member of the family. Typical experiences for parents in high conflict situations during separation include:

- spending a lot of energy dealing with the conflict on a daily basis;
- making an effort to reduce the conflict that has no effect;
- repeating the same argument over and over again; and
- looking to the courts to resolve conflicts only to have the same or new conflicts arise.

The typical experiences for children whose parents are in high conflict include:

- feeling unsafe with either parent;
- spending a lot of energy trying to manage the parents' conflict;
- looking for comfort and stability outside the family; and
- keeping other aspects of their life (e.g., friends, activities, etc.) separate and away from the family.

Did you know that in high conflict situations both parents often report the same difficulties with the situation? In many cases, they blame each other as the cause of the conflict.

What Would Life Be Like Without This Conflict?

Consider your answers to the following questions:

1. What do you want most for your children? What goals and dreams do you have for them?

2. What stands in the way of your children having what you want for them?

3. How are your children being affected by the conflict?

a. List what positive outcomes would happen for your children if there was less conflict:

b. List what positive outcomes would happen for you if there was less conflict:

4. Suppose three years from now your child tells a close friend what you did to help them through the separation. What would you like them to say about your behavior?



Reality No. 1: Living in conflict is no way to live!

Some parents find that copying this handout and keeping it accessible is a good reminder of what they have to gain by trying the different strategies they learn in this course.

Parents often feel the other parent is the cause of a lot of the conflict affecting them and their children. This may be true (or they may feel the same way about you), but resigning yourself to years of conflict because the other parent is difficult is unnecessary. There is a lot you can do to reach the positive outcomes you have identified, and this course will provide you with many ideas.

Boundaries help make life predictable and peaceful.

- **You cannot change the other parent, but you can control your own behavior and help your child get what they need to adjust well to your separation or divorce. You will learn ways to help throughout this program.**
- **It's worth the effort to create change by acting in ways that make you proud of your parenting and make your child feel proud of you.**

Research shows that **lowering conflict** and providing good parenting makes the difference in how children adjust and cope after separation. This course is about helping you lower conflict with your child's other parent and keep your parenting strong.

Many parents in high conflict separations feel at a loss to stop the conflict from occurring. The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. **One parent has the ability to make a difference!**

In this course, we will discuss:

- where the conflict starts and what keeps it going;
- how one parent can reduce the conflict regardless of what the other parent does; and
- how to make changes that bring more peace into you and your children's lives.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Section 2 – Protecting Your Children



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- children with fewer negative childhood experiences are more likely to grow up mentally and physically healthy;
- toxic stress caused by parental conflict can affect the development of a child's brain; and
- you can protect your children by providing positive, reliable family relationships.

Negative Childhood Experiences

Negative experiences can happen to children both inside and outside of their family that can affect them deeply.

Research shows that intense or repeated stressful and traumatic events during childhood can have compounding negative effects on children. These experiences can create emotional scars that last a lifetime.

Researchers have defined the following **10 types of negative childhood experiences**, many of which may be present when parents are in high conflict.

Childhood Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• psychological abuse• physical abuse• sexual abuse
Childhood Neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• emotional neglect• physical neglect
Household Dysfunction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• exposure to substance abuse• exposure to untreated mental illness• witnessing domestic violence• marital discord• criminal behavior in the household

Research shows that the more of the 10 negative experiences children are exposed to or live with, the more likely they are to have **mental health and relationship difficulties** in their childhood and as adults.

It is important to remember that it is **never too late to make changes**.

Reducing conflict takes energy and commitment. It isn't always easy.

Toxic Stress

In today's society, children are exposed to many types of stress. Some stress is healthy, such as trying a new skill, joining a team or receiving a vaccination. These situations may cause anxiety, but they help children to learn and grow. Some negative situations can be difficult for children to cope with, such as an injury or a loss. These stresses are tolerable and will not have long lasting effects if they are time-limited and the child has strong support from the important adults in their life.

High conflict between parents or family violence may expose children to a number of scary, confusing or traumatizing experiences. Research shows that these continuous conflict experiences can have a strong negative impact on children's abilities to keep their emotions stable and calm, which in turn, affects the way they cope with problems and upsetting emotions throughout their lives.

When children live in fear and worry (which happens when there is ongoing, high parental conflict), over time the stress puts wear and tear on their developing brain. The child begins to read interactions with many people as if each one could blow up into a conflict situation. As this type of response becomes routine, your child may find it increasingly difficult to be close to people.

Over time stress becomes toxic to the brain. It can affect the brain's architecture, the basic building structure, leading to learning delays, anxiety, addictions, memory problems, and many other health problems. Since brains continue to develop into a person's twenties, even older children are affected by toxic stress.

Protecting Your Children

Not all children who have been exposed to high conflict, abuse and/or family violence will experience the effects of toxic stress if adults recognize the danger and take steps to protect the children. Children can be shielded from conflict. **YOU are the most important protection your child has.**

Children are protected best when parents:

- listen and pay attention to them and provide consistent support and encouragement;
- keep conflict out of the children's ears and eyes;
- continue to parent by being aware of and involved in what is going on in their child's life; and
- surround the children with positive, caring family and friends.



Reality No. 2: Children need to be protected from the toxic stress of conflict. One parent can reduce the stress.

In this course, you will see a video titled “How Brains are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development”. The video was produced by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, and it can be found on their website at: www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-brain-development.

From this video, fill in the blanks of the following statements:

1. Brains are built over time based on our _____.
2. Solid brain foundation can be built in a child through _____ and return interactions.
3. Stress also shapes brain development. _____ stress is bad for brain development.
4. Nurturing experiences are needed for _____ development.
5. To build better _____, we need to build better brains.

Learn more about protecting your child from toxic stress in the “Important Information” section.

Answers: 1. experiences 2. serve 3. Toxic 4. positive 5. futures

The exercise below will help you identify the types of stressors your children have experienced due to high conflict. Consider some things you can do to protect your children from toxic stress. Throughout this course, you will be given more ideas and suggestions on how to reduce conflict within your family.

Children's Experiences of Parental High Conflict

Children whose parents are in high conflict are exposed to a number of scary, confusing or traumatic experiences. Look carefully at this list of examples and note which one(s) your children have experienced. **We will not ask you to share your list.**

- ☐ Hearing hurtful words and insults toward one parent or exchanges between both parents.
- ☐ Hearing scary tones or threats in their parent's voices.
- ☐ Seeing threatening body language.
- ☐ Seeing a parent being humiliated or physically hurt.
- ☐ Hearing a parent screaming or crying.
- ☐ Hearing a parent blaming the other parent harshly.
- ☐ Feeling forced to choose one parent over the other.
- ☐ Feeling a parent's withdrawal.
- ☐ Hearing older siblings and/or family members whispering about what is happening.
- ☐ Seeing signs of violence (i.e., bruising, fearful parent, etc.).

Do any other experiences belong on this list?

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Section 3 – Managing Emotions



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- both during and after separation, each parent experiences grief differently, and it can lead to conflict;
- the goal for parents is to become disengaged from the other parent;
- by changing your approach toward the other parent, conflict can be reduced and disengagement can happen; and
- each parent has to deal with the separation by themselves.

Separation and Divorce as a Time of Grief

Grief in divorce is very much like the grief experienced following the death of a loved one, with one major exception – nothing is “final” in divorce. For many former partners and their children, the hope of getting back together remains. Children or parents may feel this way after the divorce is final, after one parent remarries, and even after years have passed. This means that the experience of grief as a result of separation or divorce may be repeated, take a long time, or feel unresolved.

During separation and divorce, many losses are suffered, including hopes and dreams, identity as someone’s partner/spouse, time with children and extended family, trust, things you own, and security – both personal and economic. These losses contribute to separation and divorce as a time of grief.

Each parent is likely to experience grief differently. They both feel similar emotions but for different reasons, causing each parent to behave in ways that can be hard for the other parent to understand.

Each parent is likely to experience grief differently. They both feel similar emotions but for different reasons, causing each parent to behave in ways that can be hard for the other parent to understand.

Let’s look at the example of Michelle and Paul:

Michelle had been thinking about separation for a long time, but she worried about how the breakup of her family would hurt her children and Paul. She ended up having an affair. When Paul found out about the affair, Michelle knew it was time to end the marriage. Although certain it was the right thing to do, she still feels guilty and sad about being the one to end it, and she wants to have the best separation possible. It makes her mad that she was the only one who could see the marriage was over, and it seems she is constantly defending her decision. What she really wants now is to put the past aside and work out the best parenting schedule possible for the kids. She is pretty clear in her mind about how to divide up their property, and she can’t understand why Paul can’t just get over it, face reality and make some decisions.

Paul knew there were problems in his relationship with Michelle, but he always thought they would work it out. When he found out that Michelle was having an affair, he felt so betrayed and angry, he thought the marriage was over. Now Paul wants to have his family back. The kids don’t deserve this. If Michelle would only realize how hard this is on everyone, she might give it another try, but she doesn’t seem to care about anyone but herself. Paul is sometimes overwhelmed by sadness and loneliness. Michelle just wants to finalize everything, and that makes him angry. He didn’t ask for this, and because it is what Michelle wants, he has to lose his home, time with his children, money, and all his dreams for the future. It isn’t fair.

Both Paul and Michelle are feeling similar emotions of sadness and anger, and both can see a way to have a positive relationship with the other parent. For Michelle it would be better if Paul got past the breakup, move on and separate well. For Paul it would be better if Michelle could realize how much she has hurt the family and make amends, apologize and try to work on the relationship. In other words, each parent thinks the other parent has to do something differently to fix the situation.

Now when Michelle and Paul interact, they both try to make the other parent change their behavior. In the process, both are feeling hurt, betrayed, guilty and misunderstood. They react to those emotions and lash out at each other. It happens over and over again.

Even parents who only had a brief relationship with the other parent may be disappointed with how the parenting relationship has worked out in co-parenting. In these circumstances, one parent may wish that the other parent would have no involvement at all with their child.

As a result of not experiencing the separation in the same way, and being unable to appreciate the other parent’s feelings and perceptions, contact between parents can lead to confrontation and conflict.

What is the result of all this? Each parent wants the other parent to understand how they are thinking and feeling in the belief that this will change the other parent’s behavior. When the other parent doesn’t change their behavior and emotions are triggered, conflict occurs.



Reality No. 3: Conflict is the result of a parent's attempts to change the other parent's behavior.



Conflict as a Form of Emotional Intimacy

What are some emotions you feel when you are in love? How do you act?

What are some emotions you feel when you are enraged with or hate someone? How do you act?

How quickly do you feel emotions in response to what the other parent says or does? How intense are these emotions compared to other people in your life?

When couples have been emotionally intimate and/or share a child, they have highly emotional reactions to each other, whether the emotions are positive or negative. Love and hate are both signs of intense involvement. When one parent is not affected emotionally by what the other parent says and does, then they are less emotionally involved. Being disengaged or disinterested signals distance, moving toward less intimate involvement.

Emotionally disengaged parents find it easier to cooperate with one another. They get less upset about the other's private life, or at least, they are willing to draw a boundary between the other's private life and their need to know about it.

A goal for reducing conflict is to become less engaged with the other parent and allow them to also become less engaged. As you separate emotionally, you will find that what the other parent says or does that once hurt or angered you, no longer affects you in the same way or to the same extent.

How Do We Reach Disengagement?

1. **Change how you approach interactions with the other parent.** Learn to think differently and react less emotionally as a result. Two helpful strategies are to avoid assumptions and use self-talk. These strategies are discussed on the following page.
2. **Reduce the opportunities for conflict by setting clear boundaries.** Less interaction and instances of conflict allows both parents the time and space they need to deal with the separation and grieve the end of the relationship. Boundary setting will be discussed in the next section.

This course will discuss both of these methods for achieving disengagement.



Reality No. 4: When parents reduce contact and emotionally disengage, they have space to grieve and lower conflict levels.

Changing How You Approach Interactions with the Other Parent

Avoid Assumptions

It is easy to assume the other parent does or says things that are the cause of your emotional responses, but there is another way to understand what happens. Your emotions are not the result of the other parent's behavior, but the meaning you attach to the behavior. When your former partner says or does something, you may be quick to interpret the behavior as being a problem and react according to the meaning you give the words or behavior.

**Interaction
Reaction**



Interpretation



Emotional

In the example below, notice how we interpret the same words differently depending on the person speaking them, and how that leads to different emotional reactions.

Interaction	Interpretation	Emotional Reaction
"You're working so late" said by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• your boss• your mother• the other parent• a friend	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a compliment• concern/worry• a complaint• sympathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• happy/proud• warmth• annoyed/angry• supported

Interpreting what the other parent does or says is a rapid, knee jerk response. It is part of a thinking pattern, and people can choose how they will interpret a given situation. The choice you make can influence your emotional reactions, and the emotions you focus on can change your thoughts.

Self-talk Your Way Into Another View of the Interaction

When you catch yourself wanting to say nasty or negative things about the other parent to your child, or catch yourself wanting to pry, you can use **self-talk** to stop.

Self-talk includes statements you say to yourself to make it easier to avoid exposing your child to conflict.

Here are some examples of self-talk. You probably have your own examples you can add to this list:

- I'm not going to say or do this in front of our child.
- I need to take a deep breath and NOT respond to this.
- I can't undo what [the other parent] did, but I can limit the damage.
- She's only a kid. It's not her job to listen to stuff like this.
- I am not going to let this get the best of me.
- I am not going to let [the other parent] get me upset.
- [The other parent] is not going to ruin this time with my child.
- I am not going down this path again. I am staying disengaged.
- We're working as parents now.
- Our child comes first.

- _____
- _____
- _____



Reality No. 5: You can help yourself be less emotionally reactive by deciding to interpret the other parent's behavior either neutrally or positively.

Self-talk also includes ways of managing negative thoughts by questioning them. We learned on the previous page how to replace negative thoughts with more neutral ones. The middle step is to recognize all the ways you assign negative meaning to the other parent's words or actions. Below are categories of negative ways of thinking, along with alternative self-talk statements you could use:

- **All or Nothing:** "She is a lousy human being. I cannot believe I once thought she was decent!"

Alternatives:

- o "Is she really as bad as I make her out to be all the time?"
- o "What good things does she bring to our child?"

- **Over-generalizing** or seeing one negative example as a regular pattern of events; key words are *always* and *never*: "He is never on time to pick up our child."

Alternatives:

- o "Is he really always late, or has it just been since he got this new job a few months ago?"
- o If he is always late, am I going to let it bother me every time?
- o "He's often late. What can I do that will make it easier for our child?"

- **Dwelling on the negative:** "She is so overprotective that our child is afraid of the world."

Alternatives:

- o Does she always act overprotective or isn't her protectiveness sometimes just what our child needs to be safe in this neighborhood?"
- o What can I do that helps balance out her protectiveness?"

- **Jumping to conclusions** without enough information, or assuming you understand the motivations and reasons for the other person's behavior. "He is just dating our neighbor to get back at me for having an affair."

Alternatives:

- o "Is he really dating a new woman just to get back at me or could he actually like her company?"
- o "What he does is not about me unless I choose to see it that way."


- **Labeling** the other parent in a negative way: "She is such a whiner and complainer."

Alternatives:

- o "How does thinking of her as a whiner and complainer lead me to shut her down before I have even listened to what she is raising this time?"
- o "Do I have a lower tolerance level for her whining right now?"

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to identify negative thoughts:

- What leads me to view it this way?
- Would I think the same way if it was someone else I was dealing with?
- Could there be another explanation?

 **Reality No. 6: You can reduce the conflict for yourself and your children by changing your interpretation. It's not about you unless you choose to let it be about you.**



Letting Go

Grieving can be very difficult. Sometimes it feels impossible to find relief from intense feelings of sadness, anger, hurt, guilt, or resentment. Such intense emotions that won't go away can be a cause of continued conflict. A parent feeling stuck like this will likely need assistance in getting past the intense emotion. The person who is least likely to be helpful is the other parent. In fact, attempting to help the other parent or be helped by the other parent with a stuck emotion may only fuel flames of anger and hurt. If you feel you are stuck, seek help from someone outside the family. If the other parent seems to be stuck, give them the space and time to deal with it on their own by limiting your contact.

Find out how to answer your child's difficult questions in the "Important Information" section of this book.

Section 4 – Setting Boundaries



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- You can only change your own behaviour; you cannot change the other person.
- Boundaries define what is acceptable and outline what behaviour will be tolerated.
- Clarifying and maintaining boundaries can reduce conflict.
- Personal boundaries are used for situations in your control.
- Some boundaries need to be negotiated.

In high conflict situations, each parent often blames the other for causing the conflict.

Figuring Out What is in Your Control to Change

Parents often attempt to change the other parent's behavior, and this becomes a source of conflict between them. In order to change a situation, you can either change your own approach or you can ask the other person to change. If they are not willing to change, there is nothing you can do except find ways to cope with the situation. People spend a lot of time and energy trying to change things that they have no ability to change.

Coping by Setting Clear Boundaries

A boundary is a decision about what you will or won't do, what you are comfortable with, and what you will not tolerate. A boundary is personal; your boundaries may be different from the other parent (adapted from Peter K. Gerlach; see Sources).



Reality No. 7: You cannot change what is out of your control. The other parent's behaviour is out of your control!

Boundaries can help you cope in several ways:

- Boundaries can help you be more thoughtful about how experiences and situations may affect you.
- Boundaries can help you deal with difficult situations.
- Boundaries can help prevent you from second-guessing by deciding ahead of time what is and is not acceptable to you.

Personal boundaries are those you set for yourself.

Four steps to setting personal boundaries:

Change takes time. The other parent may not immediately believe you really want things to be different.

1. **Identify the problem:** What is the issue and how do you think about it? Stay aware of your feelings and decide what the boundary is that defines what behaviour you will not accept. Have a clear understanding about what behaviours would be 'crossing the line' because you will need to decide ahead of time what to do when this happens.
2. **Decide your response:** Consider how you have reacted to this type of situation in the past and whether that reaction was helpful or not. Decide if you have contributed to the conflict, and make a decision not to be that type of parent anymore. Think through what you will do to reduce the conflict, and picture how you will do it.
3. **Communicate:** Let the other parent know what your boundary is and what you will do if the boundary is not respected. Choose the best way to communicate so that the other parent will hear your message and everyone will be safe. It can be direct conversation, through email, through another person, through your lawyer or any other way you decide is the best method of delivering the message.
4. **Follow through** with your decision every time the situation arises. The first time you do not respond the way you said you would, you have lost credibility and the other parent will have no reason to believe you are serious about their behaviour being unacceptable.

Here are some examples of personal boundaries:

Issue	Whenever there is an issue, the other parent inundates you with calls and text messages. Many times, these end up in angry exchanges which go on and on. It is especially hard to deal with when they occur during work hours.
Step 1: Boundary Decision From now on...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will not take calls or read texts while at work. • I will not call or text the other parent until I have time to calmly think things through. • I will use strategies to help me like writing emails but not sending them.
Step 2: Responses to Disrespect of Boundary What I'll do instead is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will use call display and not answer calls from the other parent while at work. • I will politely end the call if I answer by mistake. • I will not read texts from the other parent until the end of the workday. • I will return appropriate calls and texts after 6 p.m.
Step 3: Communication I'll tell them about my boundary by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will send an email at a time when things are calm that says: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o "I cannot use work time to answer calls or texts. After work I will check and return messages. o If there is an emergency during the day, please contact xxx to get hold of me."
Step 4: Follow Through What if...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The other parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Says I am irresponsible? o Calls over and over. o Leaves a text message that says it is urgent? o Agrees and doesn't call work for several weeks and then calls one day? • Answer: Follow through on your "responses to disrespect of boundary."

Issue	Conversations often become angry arguments/fights regardless of the topic (e.g., drop off times, what the kids eat, what I spend money on, the color of the sky, etc.).
Step 1: Boundary Decision From now on...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will not continue a conversation if it includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> raised voices; swearing; or personal attacks.
Step 2: Responses to Disrespect of Boundary What I'll do instead is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As soon as the boundary is crossed by the other parent, or I feel myself getting to the breaking point, I will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> End the conversation by announcing I am hanging up the phone. Walk away or stop texting or emailing. Return the call the following day.
Step 3: Communication I'll tell them about my boundary by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will call the other parent on the phone at a good time to say that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "When we start fighting, it gets us nowhere, and I wind up upset all day. I have decided that if the conversation turns into an argument, I will end it and give myself 24 hours before I talk to you again."
Step 4: Follow Through What if...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The other parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says I am controlling or selfish? Keeps calling me back over and over. Tells me that they will tell the children that I am causing the problems? Has been working on improving the communication and after many good conversations, one turns into a fight? Answer: Follow through on your "responses to disrespect of boundary."

Issue	Your privacy is invaded, and you have nowhere to retreat to when the other parent walks into your home. You are fearful because there has been physical violence in the past.
Step 1: Boundary Decision From now on...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will not allow the other parent into my home. During exchanges, I will send and take the children out the door to the other parent. I will not enter the other parent's home. I will wait outside the other parent's home in my car.
Step 2: Responses to Disrespect of Boundary What I'll do instead is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell the other parent that the children will be right out and ask them to wait outside. Keep the door locked until the children are ready to leave. Develop a safety plan. Have another person present during the exchanges. Call the police if the other parent refuses to leave my home.
Step 3: Communication I'll tell them about my boundary by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will send this email and cc my lawyer: "I am not comfortable when you come into my home. From now on, I will open the door when the children are ready to leave with you. I will text and let you know when I am outside your home, so the children can meet me at my car."
Step 4: Follow Through What if...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The other parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tells me it is illegal for me to not let them in? Stands outside the door and yells at me? Is standing in the freezing cold waiting for the children? Answer: Follow through on your "responses to disrespect of boundary."

Find out more about family violence, abuse and safety planning in the Important Information section of this book.

Figuring Out What is in Your Control to Change

A personal boundary is the invisible line between what you will or won't do, what you are comfortable with, and what you will not tolerate. One task you both face is to clarify and accept each other's new boundaries as you move to being separated and/or divorced co-parents.

Issue	
Step 1: Boundary Decision From now on...	
Step 2: Responses to Disrespect of Boundary What I'll do instead is...	
Step 3: Communication I'll tell them about my boundary by...	
Step 4: Follow Through What if...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Answer: Follow through on your "responses to disrespect of boundary" regardless of what the other parent says or does.

What issues will you need to work out with the other parent to resolve the conflicts between you?



Reality No. 8: By defining clear boundaries, you can establish limits on what, when and how you communicate with the other parent.

Negotiated boundaries are those you need to work out with the other parent, and they require both parents following through with them.

Some examples of the issues that require negotiation are:

- whether there will be changes to the parenting schedule;
- who will attend the children's events;
- how the children's activities will be paid for; and
- when one parent will not communicate with the other parent.

Here is an example of a situation where boundaries need to be negotiated:

Since the separation, the parents' different views on medical issues have become a problem. Paul believes that natural medicine and alternative healing practices are the way to address a child's health. Michelle tolerated Paul's ideas about health when they were together, but now she has no patience for them. They are always arguing about the use of herbal remedies and supplements as well as antibiotics for their son's ear infections. Michelle was furious to discover that Paul had taken their son out of school for a series of unconventional treatment sessions.

Which boundaries have to be negotiated?

- How will decisions be made about health treatments?
- What communication is required regarding health treatments?
- What are appropriate times to take a child out of school?

We react not to what someone **SAYS** but to what we think it **MEANS**.

The parents need to negotiate the answers to these questions and clearly spell out what actions each parent must take and what will happen if the boundary is not respected. If the parents do not negotiate these boundaries, they will likely end up in conflict about them for the rest of their son's childhood.

Four possible courses of action to address the negotiation:

1. **Decide to let this one go.** There are some battles that are not worth fighting. Decide how important the issue is to you in relation to the toll it takes on you and the children. If you decide to stop fighting about an issue for the sake of peace, then come to terms with your decision and do not engage on this topic. In this case, Mom may decide it is not worth trying to stop Dad from taking their son to a naturopath, but she can negotiate not taking him out of school to do so.

If letting it go is not an option:

2. **Try to work it out by talking together.** There is a big caution here! Only do this if it is safe to do so and does not increase the conflict. Sometimes talking it out is not possible. Addictions or other mental health issues can prevent a parent from being able to negotiate. They may also be experiencing intense emotions related to grief about the end of the relationship, or one parent may be fearful of the other parent. **DO NOT** continue to negotiate with someone who is unable to negotiate!

If working it out by talking together is not an option:

3. **Negotiate with help.** Review the information on the various forms of dispute resolution from the Parenting After Separation course. You may choose to negotiate with the assistance of a professional – such as a mediator, lawyer or parent coordinator – who can provide support and reduce the likelihood of conflict. If you feel this could create a risk to someone's safety, let your professional know and decide together how to proceed.

If working it out by negotiating with help is not an option:

4. **Apply to the court for a decision.** When safety is a concern, or if one of the parents is unwilling or unable to negotiate (even with help), the court may be the best or only solution. Taking a conflict to court does mean you are giving up control of the situation, and you are required to follow the judge's decision. However, there are many situations where this may be the best option.

Section 5 – Parallel Parenting Plans



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- Boundaries are documented in a parenting plan.
- Parallel parenting plans help reduce conflict between parents.
- Parallel parenting plans need to be detailed around areas of conflict and developed specifically for the family.

Let's look at the example of Michelle and Paul again:

Paul and Michelle get into an argument whenever one calls the other to speak with the children at a time that is inconvenient for that parent. With a new parenting plan in place, the parents do not speak to each other on the phone except during hours listed in the parenting plan. The parents then know when to expect a call and are prepared for it. This helps define boundaries around their communication. Then the relationship is more formal and privacy is respected.

Tailoring Parenting Plans – Documenting Negotiated Boundaries

A parenting plan should include negotiated boundaries. Sometimes this is a document prepared by the parents themselves, but more often in high conflict situations, the document is prepared by a professional or is in the form of a court order. There may be both if the court order does not address all negotiated boundaries.

The goal of your parenting plan is disengagement from your child's other parent by reducing opportunities for conflict. To do this, you need a parenting plan that:

- provides for the physical needs, safety and care of your children;
- provides for the safety of both parents, if necessary;
- is very detailed;
- specifies both a regular and a holiday schedule;
- clearly states each parent's responsibilities and decision-making powers;
- specifies when and how parents will communicate with each other and with the children when they are with the other parent;
- details when and how transitions between parents will occur;
- specifies how disputes will be resolved; and
- doesn't assume or expect flexibility. Until conflict is reduced, flexibility can be a breeding ground for new conflict.

Researchers estimate that half to two-thirds of all divorcing families experience some level of violence around the time of separation. Preventing further violence while allowing for safe communication methods is essential for a parenting plan.

Although the communication strategy may not be everyone's preferred method, the important thing is that conflict is kept away from the children, so they can grow up in the best way possible.

If you need help making changes to your parenting plan in a high conflict situation, consult the "Who To Call" list at the beginning of this book.

Parallel Parenting

One goal after separation/divorce toward supporting your children's adjustment, is to become effective co-parents.

Co-parenting is when parents communicate and work with one another to raise their children in a cooperative way. This is difficult to do when parents are in high conflict, especially if they are critical of each other's parenting. Angry interactions make cooperation difficult to impossible.

- Research shows that when parents cannot work together for the benefit of their children and continually place them in the middle of conflict, **children are better off when their parents have less contact (and less opportunity to fight).**
- When young children play next to each other but interact little, they are said to be in parallel play. In the same way, you can parent your children with little or no direct interaction with the other parent by engaging in parallel parenting.
- **Parallel parenting means that each parent deals with the children during their scheduled time without interference from the other parent.**
- The goal of parallel parenting is to reduce your level of conflict and ensure each parent is acting effectively in parenting tasks. Parents will each develop separate routines when the child is with them. Communication will only occur under specific circumstances and using formal procedures; thereby, reducing opportunities for conflict.
- There is a myth that children cannot adapt to having different rules and circumstances at each parent's house. This is not true; most children adapt well and can even benefit from having different home lives. The exceptions are:
 - a. Very young children (under age three) need more consistency and coordination.
 - b. Children's activities must be maintained smoothly between households, and their belongings must be in both homes or carried across households with the help of parents. A parallel parenting plan will outline how to make this happen without conflict.
- With parallel parenting, your child benefits from separate relationships with each of you. Once a parallel parenting plan is in place, you have a better chance of disengaging from one another and reducing the amount of conflict your child is exposed to.

Co-Parenting vs. Parallel Parenting

Co-parenting	Parallel Parenting
Flexibility in the parenting schedule	Schedule followed exactly as stated with few exceptions
Flexibility in boundaries	Clear boundaries maintained for communication, transitions, and any time both parents are present
Joint decision making	Separate decision making; parents discuss only when necessary
Changes to parenting plan made informally by parents' agreement and on an on-going basis	Changes to parenting plan made through formal process
Parenting plan less detailed	Parenting plan very detailed
Communication between parents is informal	Communication between parents follows a formal process, with rules governing how/when, and with a business-like manner maintained
Parents strive for uniformity between homes in rules for children	Each parent sets own rules

Parallel Parenting Plan Examples

Here are some examples of situations that tend to cause conflict, followed by examples of language you could use for parallel parenting plans. They all share certain points in common.

1. The wording in the plans is detailed and specific.
2. The focus is on the area of conflict.
3. The purpose is for each part of the plan to be useful to both parents, so that both can keep up their end, conflict will be lowered, and there will be greater peace for all family members.

The following are examples of what one family negotiated for their situation. They are not meant to be the answer for any other family. You will need to determine the details of your parenting plan to meet the needs of your specific situation.

A. Decision-Making

Michelle and Paul fight about the children's summer camp every time they talk. Michelle's usual style is to investigate on her own, determine what the best option is (in her opinion), and present that option to Paul. While the parents were together, Michelle usually made these decisions for the family. Paul's style is to ponder the options for a while, and he is likely to look into all possibilities. Michelle gets frustrated and thinks Paul is avoiding making a decision. She is worried the camps will get filled up. Paul is frustrated and feels he is being pushed into making a decision before he has had time to think it through.

Parallel Parenting Solution:

- When one parent would like a decision made on a topic (camp or otherwise), they will email the other parent outlining the situation that needs to be resolved. The email may include possible options and what that parent believes would be the best course of action, including reasons for their belief.

Example email: *Hello Paul. We need to get the children enrolled in summer camp by April 30 this year to be sure the camps aren't filled up. I am including links for three different camps, and I think the first one for sports camp will be most enjoyable for the children and fit best into our schedules. We will each have to do some extra driving to get them there and pick them up each day. Thank you, Michelle.*



Reality No. 9: Predictability helps foster a more peaceful life for both you and your children.

- The other parent will have one week to respond to the proposal. If they do not reply by the end of one week, the emailing parent is free to follow their preferred option. If the other parent agrees with the proposed plan, then an agreement has been reached. If the parent does not agree, then they may offer a different suggestion or arrange a time to discuss the situation by phone or in person.
- If no agreement is reached during the discussion, the parents will attend mediation that will be arranged within one week.

B. Schedule Changes

Paul and Michelle have tried to make a parenting schedule they can both follow, but because both parents have to travel for work, they have been unable to follow a schedule. When one parent requests a schedule change, the parents often end up in conflict as they question each other's decisions to travel and make judgments about each other's priorities.

Parallel Parenting Solution:

- When one parent requires a schedule change, they will email the other parent outlining the requested change.
- The responding parent can only respond with a "yes" or "no". They may not ask for an explanation about why the first parent requires the schedule change.
- If the response is "yes", the parents will change the schedule. If the response is "no", the parents will not change the schedule, and the travelling parent will make arrangements for someone else to care for the children or change their travel plans. The travelling parent may not ask for an explanation about why the other parent is unable to change the schedule.

Example email: *Hello Michelle. I am sorry I am not able to make the change in the schedule you requested. Paul.*

C. Communication Breakdown

Paul and Michelle often accuse each other of not following agreements because they have different information or understanding about plans, such as who will pick up the children from activities or the time events start. The parents find it stressful talking to each other, so they usually rely on text messages. They also leave messages with the babysitter, who looks after the children during the day. During mediation, it became clear that texts were usually interpreted in a negative way, and the sitter often forgot to pass on messages (or perhaps chose not to) because of the reaction when she did.

One parent has the ability to make a difference!

Parallel Parenting Solution:

- The parents will use email or phone to make plans that vary from the regular parenting schedule. An email will discuss one event or plan only, and it will not include any other topics. The sitter will be informed of any changes to the schedule.
- The parents will use text messaging in the event of an emergency only.
- The parents will not leave messages with the babysitter or children.
- The parents will use positive language during all communication and keep topics of discussion strictly about the children. In the event the discussion gets off track, either parent will end the conversation (including email and text) and will then contact the other parent the following day. Once a conversation has been stopped, there will be no further communication between the parents that day.
- In the event the parents cannot agree on a change in plan or schedule, the parents will follow the regular schedule as outlined in the parenting plan.

Learn more about wording and suggestions for a parallel parenting plan in the Important Information section of this book.

Section 6 – Making it Work



In this section, we will talk about these key concepts:

- It is time to stop behaving in ways that don't help.
- There are strategies that can be helpful in dealing with the other parent.

Strategies That Don't Work

When conflict is high and parents are dealing with it on a day-to-day basis, they often resort to strategies that make them feel like they have control over the situation. Unfortunately, many of these strategies increase the conflict, leave things more out of control, and take the focus away from being an effective parent.

Some examples are:

- Trying to win in every situation
- Withdrawing and refusing to deal with any concerns
- Making allegations against the other parent in court, to children's services or to anyone else

If these have been your strategies in the past, it is time to STOP and start dealing with things in a new, more effective way. If these have been the strategies of the other parent, remember, you cannot change their behavior but you can change how you respond.

STOP allowing your separation (or the other parent) control how you live your life! Changing patterns of behavior takes time and practice.

Strategies That Do Work

Responding Positively – Brief, Informational, Clear (BIC)

In the process of changing your way of interacting with the other parent, it can be hard to find a respectful, positive way to respond. Being aware of what triggers you is important. When the other parent seems to be pushing your buttons by something they say, one strategy is to keep the BIC (Brief, Informational, Clear) in mind. These are responses that are said in a positive tone that provide your point of view in a non-confrontational way. It is no accident that BIC also stands for the Best Interests of your Child.

Here are some examples of a BIC response to inflammatory statements:

Example 1:

Parent 1: “I suppose you have a reason for leaving Billy with a babysitter when it is his one night this week with you.”

Parent 2’s BIC: “Yes, it was unavoidable and the best solution at the time. My time with Billy is very important to me, and I will only leave him with the sitter when it is absolutely necessary.”

Example 2:

Parent 1: “Julie has told me she does not like spending time with you, and she doesn’t want to see you on Thursday.”

Parent 2’s BIC: “Thank you for letting me know. Julie seemed to have had a good time with me during our last few times together. I will be sure to pay attention to how she is doing when I pick her up on Thursday.”

Knowing What You Can and Cannot Change

Often parents continue to fight about issues they have no control over, trying to make the other parent change their behavior when they have no desire to do so. As mentioned in an earlier section, the person who has control over the situation is the only one who can change it. If you can’t change the situation, you will have to work around it or come to accept it.

Example: your nine year old child consistently comes back from the other parent’s home without his belongings.

Do you have control over this situation?

The answer is no, you do not. You can ask the other parent to please pack all of the child’s belongings before the child leaves their home. However, if the other parent is unwilling to do this, all the arguing, asking and threatening in the world is unlikely to change the situation, and it will just lead to more conflict.

Another solution would be to help your child learn skills to organize and look after their own belongings, especially if they are upset when things get left behind. You may also work with your child to leave certain belongings at your house and take others that won’t be missed if left behind (e.g., an older pair of runners or a substitute stuffed animal). (Ross and Corcoran, 1996.)

For each of the following other situations:

- **Determine whether you would have control in each situation or not.**
- **What could you do in each situation?**
 1. Your child complains that the other parent has unreasonable rules at their house.
 2. The other parent is often late to pick up the children.
 3. Your children tell you that their grandparent on the other side is always saying nasty things about you.

STOP trying to change things that are out of your control!

Find out more about high conflict personalities in the “Important Information” section of this book.

Changing What You Can

Scenario – The Arena Incident

Henry's parents have been separated for two years. Henry's father brought him to the hockey game because this weekend was his parenting time. Henry's mother and her new partner, Joseph, came to the last game, but they showed up on this night, too. Henry's dad did not know ahead of time that they would be there. Mom and Joseph went into the locker room after the game to congratulate Henry on a good game, and father, mother and new partner exchanged some snide comments in front of the children and other parents.

Questions for Discussion:

- How did Henry likely feel?
- Suppose you are the mother. What is in your control?
- Suppose you are the father. What is in your control?

Later that evening on the phone:

Father: "What do you think you're doing? I never want to see that jerk at my son's hockey game again or you'll be sorry. Don't bring him there again."

Mother: "You can't tell me what to do. I left you so I wouldn't have to do what you say all the time. Besides, Henry loves it when Joseph is there. It's your problem, not ours."

Father: "Bull. Henry doesn't even like this guy. You should hear what he says about him. You're forcing him down the kid's throat."

Mother: "You're the one who causes all the problems. Can't you just leave us alone? You're the one who's hurting Henry."

Father: "You always think of yourself. You left, and now you think I'll sit back and watch him take over my son. Forget it. You've messed up the kids. This is all your fault, and you need to take the blame for once."

Questions for Discussion:

- Where did this situation go off track?
- What are some of the fears the parents may be feeling?
- How could each of them be interpreting the words/behaviors of the other parent?
- What are some self-talk statements that Dad could use?
- What are some self-talk statements that Mom could use?
- Which personal boundaries may help prevent or lower the conflict?
- What are some negotiated boundaries that could be included in a parallel parenting plan to help with this situation?

Alternative Scenario – Telephone Calls

A mother calls her child's father at work and at home three to five times a day. She doesn't really have important things to talk about, and she sometimes just talks about the past. At times, it seems like she wants to pick a fight. The father has several concerns: his employer is getting angry because the mother is phoning him at work several times a day, and recently, she has started calling during suppertime and late in the evening. He just wants to move on.

Use the same discussion questions above.

Find out more information about how to handle difficult situations with your child's other parent in the "Important Information" section of this book.

Wrap-Up

Developing New Skills Takes Time

- Stopping conflict takes time. Don't expect to be able to do this perfectly right away.
- Learning new skills takes practice. You will make mistakes. Each of these is an opportunity to learn and improve.
- Don't expect the other parent to respond well right away when you start doing things differently. They may not believe it when you begin behaving with new boundaries. It may take them some time to catch on and give you credit for behaving differently. That shouldn't stop you from enjoying the benefits of becoming less emotionally involved in what the other parent thinks.
- Remember to reward yourself when you are successful at keeping the children out of the conflict. Tell yourself you did a great job or call a supportive friend and tell them about it. This will make you more likely to use these strategies the next time conflict starts to develop.
- When you manage your thinking, feelings and behaviour in these ways, you minimize the negative impact of separation and divorce on your children, and you'll feel good knowing you are doing your best to protect them.



Reality No. 10:

Change doesn't happen overnight, but it is worth the effort!

Worksheet

My Take Away Message and What I'll Do Differently

Complete the take away messages below:

1. My take away message:

2. Something I will do differently:

The Realities

Living in conflict is no way to live!



Children need to be protected from the toxic stress of conflict. One parent can reduce the stress.

Conflict is the result of a parent's attempts to change the other parent's behaviour.

When parents reduce their conflict and emotionally disengage, they have space to grieve and lower the levels of conflict that exist between them.

You can help yourself be less emotionally reactive by deciding to interpret the other parent's behaviour either neutrally or positively.

You can reduce the conflict for yourself and your children by changing how you interpret things. It's not about you, unless you choose it to be.

You cannot change what is out of your control. The other parent's behaviour is out of your control.

By defining clear boundaries, you can establish limits on the what, when and how you will communicate with the other parent.

Predictability helps foster a more peaceful life for your children and yourself.

Change doesn't happen overnight, but it is worth the effort!

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You are the most important protection your child has from the effects of toxic stress.

Important Information

How Kids Work 101

Everywhere these days people are talking about early childhood development. It's not just parents; it's grandparents, government and business leaders. Why are people so concerned? Because they know that we can only succeed as a province when all of our children can thrive and take their place in our communities.

To ensure we use our strengths as an innovative province in ways that actually improve outcomes for kids, we need to understand how children develop. This is where our responsibilities as parents and citizens come together. In these next few paragraphs, we will talk about the science of early child development and offer simple lessons that spell out what all of us can do to improve our children's futures.

What actually develops? It all begins with **brain architecture**, how the brain is built. The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the foundation, or architecture, of the developing brain. The brain will grow with either a strong or weak foundation that will be the basis of development and behaviors throughout life, and we all know that getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. The brain's architecture is made up of many parts that are connected and built together.

Quick Quiz:

True or false:

1. Experiences only matter when a child is old enough to remember them.
2. Real learning begins when a child enters school.
3. The brain's capacity is determined at birth.

Answer: These are all false. Early experiences affect how well a brain develops.

How exactly does it work? The way the brain gets built is much like a tennis game. **Serve and Return** happens when young children reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, gestures and cries. If adults respond by returning the babbling and gesturing, it helps build the child's brain. Serve and Return works best with adults who are close and who care about the child. If adults do not respond, the child's learning process is interrupted and incomplete. Young children need many of these interactions every day, since they are literally the building blocks of brain architecture.

Quick Quiz:

Which of the following may weaken Serve and Return:

- A. Depression.
- B. Constant changes in caregivers at a daycare center.
- C. Families forced to work three or four jobs on different shifts to make ends meet.

Answer: All of these have the potential to negatively affect Serve and Return.

It may not look like much to the viewer, but early learning is important to everything that follows. For example, children learn very early on to pay attention by developing something like an **Air Traffic Control System** in their brains. There are so many things for children to manage, to them it is very much like landing planes at a busy airport. The child has to learn what to pay attention to and to focus on tasks so that everything gets done. In children, this ability to decide what to focus on (called executive function) is developed when it is practiced as early as possible. This can be done with activities such as play-acting and taking turns, which teaches kids how to behave around others and how they should act in different situations.

This executive function will serve a child throughout their life, making it easier for them to learn information and use skills in a variety of new and complex situations. Children need a variety of experiences to practice this skill. Each experience builds a better base for all the steps in the child's learning.

Quick Quiz:

Which of the following activities is the best way to develop the brain's Air Traffic Control System?

- A. A program that emphasizes early memorization of the ABCs to help kids learn to read.
- B. Rehearsing and performing in a class play and learning when to speak and interact with others.
- C. Learning to count change and put coins in a piggybank.

Answer: B. These activities teach executive functioning skills related to paying attention and getting along in society.

What matters most? Experiences and environments count every bit as much as DNA. Our DNA genes have instructions on them that tell our bodies how to work; however, the environment decides how the work will be carried out by the body. Positive experiences, such as good nutrition, give the "okay" for the body to work in the positive way the gene's instructions call for. Negative experiences, like exposure to violence or abuse, cause negative outcomes by the body. Because the environment's effect on a person's genes can last a lifetime, it is crucial that society ensures genes receive positive environmental instructions early on.

Quick Quiz:

True or false:

- A. Negative experiences can negatively affect how the body works regardless of genes.
- B. Experiences get built into brain architecture just like building materials.
- C. Environments are powerful, but genes are set in stone.

Answer: A and B are true, C is false. The structure of genes is changed by environments and experiences.

What disrupts development? Stress is the bad guy in the story of child development, but even here it depends on the power and duration of the stress that our children are exposed to.

A **positive stress** happens in situations that are mildly stressful, like the first day with a new caregiver or receiving an immunization. It is a normal and necessary part of healthy development, which will cause short increases in heart rate and hormone levels.

A **tolerable stress** more strongly activates the body's alert system due to more severe, longer lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the stress is time-limited and cushioned by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what may otherwise be damaging effects.

A **toxic stress** occurs when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged hardship, such as physical or emotional abuse or chronic family poverty without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and it increases the risk of stress-related disease and poor thinking ability well into the adult years. Toxic stress literally gets built into the brain and body. Society can work to prevent toxic stress responses in young children by reducing their exposure to extreme environments and experiences. We can also provide protective relationships at school and in the community that turns toxic stress into tolerable stress.

Quick Quiz:

Match the type of stress on the left to the event on the right for a five-year-old child:

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| A. Toxic stress. | 1. Moving from one grade to another. |
| B. Tolerable stress. | 2. Being fearful in a violent neighborhood. |
| C. Positive stress. | 3. Staying with loving grandparents, while the parents are overseas. |

Answer: A-2, B-3, C-1

How can we prevent negative outcomes? We can think about how early negative experiences affect later development in the same way that fault-lines (cracks in the earth's surface) sometimes result in full-blown earthquakes. Like a fault-line in the earth, people's brains can develop small cracks. These **brain fault-lines** can form in a number of ways. Some people may be born with brain fault-lines. In other cases, they appear as the brain develops. They can also develop over time as people experience stress and don't have the supportive relationships they need to help them through it. However, just because there is a fault-line, it doesn't mean there will be an earthquake.

Brain fault-lines are triggered by stresses and experiences that turn them into earthquakes, which can do a huge amount of damage. For example, these earthquakes may appear as illness or addictions. We know there are things we can do to minimize the chances that existing fault-lines turn into earthquakes. There are some treatments once the earthquake has happened, but it is better to prevent them from happening in the first place.

Quick Quiz:

True or False:

- A. Once the brain has a fault-line, it is a matter of time before the earthquake happens.
- B. A child can go through life with a brain fault-line, but as long as there is nothing to trigger it, they will be fine.
- C. A child can overcome a fault-line in the brain by using willpower.

Answer: Only B is true. We will never see the effects of a brain fault-line if caring adults ensure the child is protected from triggers like toxic stress.

What can we do to protect children from harm? Preventing toxic stress and ensuring brain fault-lines aren't triggered requires us to focus on the child's ability to function at home and in the community. Some people say that helping children's mental health is like using a Sugar Packet to keep a table from wobbling. The table can't be steady if it is on a slanted floor or if one of its legs is uneven. Similarly, children can't function fully if the environment in which they grow up in is uneven or unstable. This affects their mental health and weakens their development. A table can't level itself; we have to step in and do something to steady the base. Putting a child in a violent or extremely unsupportive environment, or uprooting the child from their home, is like placing a table on uneven ground.

When we step in by stabilizing the child's mental health and ensuring they are cared for, they can thrive in their environment. Parents who see their children showing signs of extreme anxiety, fear or shyness should not ignore it and hope the wobble will go away. Their health care professional should be consulted.

Quick Quiz:

Choose the answer in which the Sugar Packet Effect is being used:

- A. A daycare worker notices a child's disruptive behaviour and recommends a child mental health counselor to the family.
- B. A doctor asks the parent during a regular check-up about the child's after-school routine.
- C. A community volunteer asks parents whether the child could use a friendly reading tutor to help her learn to read.

Answer: These are all good examples of the Sugar Packet Effect and of caring adults working to catch children before they fall.



How to Answer Your Child's Difficult Questions and Comments

In any situation where your child confides in you, whether it's about school, friends, work or their other parent, your first instinct is to want to help them. However, part of encouraging healthy development in children is teaching them healthy boundaries, and that means that even when your child has a problem, it does not automatically become "your" problem to fix. Sometimes your job is just to listen, be supportive, and help them figure it out. Even when there is nothing that can be done to change a situation, it is helpful for your child to talk to a non-reactive, caring parent about what is upsetting them.

Your child may confide in you about something that you feel endangers their safety or security. If your child tells you something that makes you think they are at genuine risk with the other parent, it is important to contact Child Protection Services for help as they are the most qualified professionals to assess child risk. These are exceptional circumstances.

Most things your child will talk to you about regarding their other parent will have to do with your child's feelings: of happiness, sadness, or anything-in-between involving their interactions and relationship with the other parent. These are normal feelings in normal situations that your child must live through and learn to deal with.

Part of healthy development for children is learning how to recognize and manage their emotions. Another part is learning what they can do to change their situation. These are skills for life that you can nurture while being a helpful and wise ally on your child's journey.

No matter what situation your child faces, there are four basic things you can always do to help them:

1. clear your mind and heart of "your" issues;
2. listen to your child and help them identify their feelings;
3. provide your child with reassurance and information appropriate to their age and their "need to know"; and
4. see if you can help your child cope by strengthening their ability to understand their feelings, soothe themselves, identify possible solutions, and solve their own problems.

Listen to your child and help them identify their feelings.

When your child asks a difficult question or shares something that is bothering them, start by listening no matter what they talk about. Try not to interrupt. Focus your attention on them, making eye contact if possible. Encourage them to keep talking by saying things like: “oh”, “uh-huh”, “yes”, “and then what happened”, “tell me more about that”, and so on.

While they are talking, try to hear their feelings. If they don’t say out loud how they feel, try to guess. This is especially important for younger children who are often not able to identify feelings. For example, “It sounds like you feel sad (or upset/unsure/curious/worried, etc.) about that.” Older children can usually tell you how they feel. If your older child does not mention how they feel about the situation they are talking about, take a guess. They will correct you if you are wrong.

Summarize what they said, including their feelings.

Summarize what they said in a sentence: “You were mad because you had to go to bed, while everyone else stayed up late.” “You’re sad because your dad said he’d get a dog, but then he changed his mind.” Summarizing what your child has talked about and naming how they feel, tells them they can count on you to pay attention to their feelings and that you understand.

Say something that focuses on your child (provide your child with reassurance and possibly information that is appropriate to their age and their need to know). **Ask them what they think they can do to feel better.**

For example, “That’s hard.” “I am sorry that feels bad.” “You don’t have to choose between your dad and I.” I’m sorry you heard that.” This empathizes with your child and lets them know you get it. Next, ask them what they can do to feel better. You may need to brainstorm options with your child, and then help them pick the best solution. This helps your child create new possibilities, see themselves as having some control, and move on to what they can do to feel better.

- **Listen for their feelings.**
- **Summarize what they said, including their feelings.**
- **Say something that focuses on your child.**
- **Ask them what they think they can do to feel better.**

Why doesn’t mommy/daddy want to see me anymore?

- Assure children it is not their fault. It is okay to tell your child you do not know why this is happening. If it seems appropriate, encourage children to call/write/text the parent to let them know they are being thought about.
- Do not speak negatively about the other parent.
- Check with the other parent’s family to see if they would like to maintain a relationship with the children. This will build extra family support for your children, and it may eventually bring the other parent back into their lives.

Do you still love my mommy/daddy?

- Instead of answering with a simple “no”, try saying, “We don’t love each other in the same way anymore, but I only want good things for your mom/dad,” or “I will always care for your mom/dad because I know how much they mean to you, and we shared part of our life together.”
- If, in fact, you do still love the other parent and hope for reconciliation, it is best not to share this with your children. It may create false hopes or make them feel responsible to take care of you or to try and make the reconciliation happen.

Your child asks you to buy something, and you don’t have the money.

- It is okay to say, “We can’t afford that right now.”
- Is it **not** okay to say, “We can’t afford that because your other parent didn’t pay the money they were supposed to.”
- Assure children they are not responsible for grownups’ financial worries. Children should not be burdened with financial stresses they can do nothing about.

I want to live with my mom/dad, and I’m old enough to decide.

- There is no legal age that children have the right to choose which parent they will live with. Until they reach age 18, parents are responsible for making these decisions for them.
- Assure your child that their opinion matters and you will consider their wishes, but decision-making responsibility remains with the parents. If you can’t decide, the courts will make these decisions in your children’s best interest.
- Listen to your child to find out what is behind the desire to live with one parent. It may have little to do with the parents themselves, but instead have to do with where the child’s friends live.
- No matter how mature your child seems, they will feel better knowing they do not have to choose between their parents.

Your child comes home from the other parent's home and seems upset. They tell you, "Dad/Mom says you waste money, party all the time, and sleep around with anyone who will have you."

- It is natural to be defensive. Take two deep breaths and remember that you are a role model, and your child is learning from your response. It is okay to say, "I don't agree with that, but everyone is entitled to their opinion." You can also say something like, "I'm sorry you had to hear that. It must have been hard to listen to."
- If the negative remarks from the other parent continue, you may want to ask your child (preadolescent or older) for their perception of you. This can be helpful in terms of "reality testing." (Do the remarks fit with your child's reality and knowledge of you?) Explain that the other parent should not say those things, and you are sorry they had to hear them. Reassure them they don't need to decide who is right or wrong, and that when parents are angry, they sometimes say mean things about each other.
- If these remarks are ongoing and are upsetting to your child, you can help them learn coping skills to deal with the situation. There are many books on this topic, and individual and group counselling can also help.
- Children will often ask complex questions about your relationship with the other parent. For the most part, all children really need to know is that you and the other parent love them and will take care of them. They don't need to worry about adult relationships and issues.
- In a situation where the other parent tells the child an untrue or inappropriate story, parents can clarify the facts, provide age-appropriate information, and refuse to discuss why the parent may have said what they said. For example, "I don't know why your mom would say that."

Your child tells you the other parent asks her for information every time she is at their house. She gives you some examples, and you realize that your ex has used this information in a fight with you.

- If you feel it would be helpful, use the communication method outlined in your parallel parenting plan to let the other parent know of your concern.
- Think about whether any of the questions being asked by the other parent would be useful information for them to know. If so, find a time to share that information directly. Let the other parent know that you will answer any legitimate questions, so they don't need to try and find out in other ways.
- As mentioned previously, listen to your child and help them identify their feelings and how they would like to respond to the situation (if at all).
- Remember to maintain personal boundaries and only share information that you think is important to your children's upbringing and/or the parenting plan in place.

Your adolescent tells you the other parent is acting "like a hurt child" and demanding the adolescent take care of them. You think the other parent has a personality disorder, but you aren't sure what that means or what you should do about it.

- Regardless of whether the other parent's behavior is caused by a personality disorder, by the grief they are dealing with in the moment, or because they have always been difficult, your child needs you to listen to their concerns and help them learn to cope.
- Your child may need help through the separation and beyond to maintain a healthy sense of self while dealing with a difficult parent. If you have very young children and you think the other parent is unable to properly take care of them, you should make sure your parenting plan has safety features built into it. Seek help from books, other resources, and professionals who understand difficult personalities and have experience dealing with them. They can help you and your children navigate through what may be stormy waters and frequent emotional roller coasters.



Remember, one parent refusing to engage in conflict is better than two parents behaving in a way that is harmful.

Your nine-year-old tells you the other parent is drinking or smoking weed regularly when they are at that parent's house.

- A parent drinking to excess or using drugs while caring for a child of any age places the child at risk. Substance use impairs judgement and capacity to think about a child's needs. Moreover, serious substance use may lead a parent to use a child to facilitate their needs, exposing the child to dangerous circumstances and people.
- Children in these situations will often defend that parent. They may even learn to cover for them. Children may begin to join the parent in their distorted views and will often want to believe the parent does not have a problem.
- If you have young children, take every precaution to build safety features into your parenting plan. You may need to consult with someone trained in this area to help you clarify your concerns and figure out how to address them in a parenting plan. If you have older children, explain to them that substance abuse is a kind of illness, and their other parent may end up hurting the children or themselves without meaning to.
 - o People addicted to substances need help and support. Covering for them or protecting them only puts everyone they love at greater risk. Empathize that you know the child loves the parent, but for now, your job is to make sure the child is safe wherever they are. As with other difficult situations, your child needs you to listen and help them learn how to cope.
- If your concerns lead you to think your child should not be at the other parent's house or in their care at all, you may choose to file for a court order restricting their parenting time. If you believe there is imminent risk when the child is at the other parent's home, then you should call Child Protection Services or the police.
 - o Remember, if you are exaggerating the other parent's problems out of your anger and ongoing conflict with them, you will be hurting and confusing your children. This stress will have a serious and lasting impact on children's perceptions that the world is a safe and secure place.

I don't like Daddy's new girlfriend. Does she have to be there when I'm there?

- Don't get pulled into siding with your child on this one, much as you may want to. Instead, express your understanding that it isn't easy for your child to share their other parent's time with someone else.
- As in other situations, put your own feelings aside and listen to your child. Identify their feelings and help them cope. There are many books and online resources that can be helpful in this situation.

Definitions of Abuse

Abuse refers to all forms of behavior where one person tries to achieve and/or maintain control or power over another. Abuse is about power and control. It is a learned behavior.

Abuse does not result from the abused person's faults or weaknesses. Abuse is not caused by poor relationships, job frustration, sexual problems, or parenting issues, although these factors may be present and cause some stress in the relationship.

When someone manipulates another person's emotions by game-playing, verbal abuse, or other methods of exercising power and control, the result is abuse. Power and control tactics take many forms, happen during different types of situations, and occur mostly in private. It may be difficult for the victim to describe their feelings. Victims often question their feelings or say they feel like they are going crazy.

There are different types of abuse, and each can range from less extreme to very dangerous.

Emotional or psychological abuse can include game-playing, put-downs, name-calling, criticism of a partner's culture or belief system, humiliation, and manipulation. The abuser will often make light of the abuse, saying it didn't happen or shifting the responsibility to the victim.

Isolation is when the abuser denies their partner access to friends and family, as well as the opportunity for social contacts and outside interests. Jealousy is used as the excuse for these actions.

Intimidation may include throwing things, punching walls and threats to hurt or kill children, pets, or friends. Making a partner watch as children or animals are abused is another form of intimidation. In addition, intimidation can include destruction of property, controlling what a partner says, following them, and making them account for every minute or every action. It may also include threats to hurt anyone who helps the partner, threats to expose the partner as an unfit parent, and threats of suicide. These behaviors should be reported to the court or child protection services.

Economic abuse involves one partner denying the other money of their own and/or access to the family income. It can also mean forcing the partner to hand over every penny they earn, to ask the abuser for money when they need to buy something, and to account for every cent they spend.

Physical abuse includes pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, punching, kicking, breaking bones, stabbing, shooting or use of other weapons; locking someone out of their home; abandoning someone in an unsafe place; and murder.

Sexual abuse can range from unwanted sex, to demanding a partner wear more (or less) provocative clothing, to forced sex with objects, friends, or animals, to insisting that a partner act out pornographic fantasies.

When people are faced with ongoing abuse, they can feel helpless, hopeless, and trapped. They will very likely experience low self-esteem and a loss of dignity, and they may fear for their overall safety and that of their children.

Children of all ages need to be protected from witnessing or hearing abuse, and from being abused themselves. Whether or not abuse has been specifically directed at them, they will require counselling support to help them heal from what they have experienced.

People stay in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons, including fear, real or perceived lack of alternatives, family pressure, and economic dependency. They do not stay because they want or deserve to be abused. If abusive individuals choose to, they can learn and practice healthier (non-abusive) ways of interacting with others.

People stay in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons, including fear, real or perceived lack of alternatives, family pressure, and economic dependency. They do not stay because they want or deserve to be abused. If abusive individuals choose to, they can learn and practice healthier (non-abusive) ways of interacting with others.

Safety Planning

A safety plan is a practical, detailed plan to reduce the risk of future violence. The plan should be as simple as possible so it can be easily followed. Consider all areas of your life: home, work, school, transit, online, and social situations. Below are some suggestions that may or may not be beneficial for your situation. Check your local resource list or the “Who to Call” list at the beginning of this manual to find someone to help you develop an effective safety plan for your situation.

Pack a Bag

- Keep it hidden but easily accessible.
- Include:
 - o Keys to your home, work, and car.
 - o Pre-paid phone cards (be careful credit card bills are not accessible).
 - o Identification for you and your children: birth certificates, passports, driver’s license, immunization records, health cards, etc.
 - o A photograph of your former partner.
 - o Other paperwork: court orders (restraining orders, parenting orders etc.), property papers (mortgage/lease agreements).
 - o Money: cash, bank cards, credit cards.
 - o Children’s toys or security items.
 - o Small valuable possessions that can be sold for money.
 - o Irreplaceable items, such as photographs.

Be Proactive

- Plan an escape route out of your house and practice using it.
- Determine the best way to leave, and have bus tickets, change, car keys ready. Park the car in a way to allow for easy escape (e.g. park facing out to prevent having to back up).
- Determine several safe places to go, such as friends or family who are aware of your situation and willing to have you stay with them. Try not to choose somewhere your ex-partner will easily guess.
- Leave a bag with clothing and essentials for you and the children at someone else’s home. Keep money in the glove compartment of your car.
- Keep a list of emergency numbers where you can find it when you need it.
- Apply for a Restraining Order or Emergency Intervention Order.
- Learn how to cover your tracks on your computer.
- Learn self-defense.
- For rural areas: try to find a safe-haven in town and identify the nearest community with a shelter. If you don’t drive, find someone who can drive you somewhere if needed.

Your Patterns

- Discuss a signal with your neighbour that will alert them to call the police (e.g., a window shade or a certain light left on).
- Tell your neighbours and co-workers, so they can call the police if something suspicious occurs.
- Let your children’s school, daycare or activities know who can pick up the children.
- Change your routines and schedules, such as the times and routes you take to and from work, shopping, banks, etc.
- Do not abuse alcohol or drugs which can reduce your awareness and ability to react to dangerous situations.
- If you are being followed, go to a place where there are lots of people or drive to a police station. Practice your route to the nearest police station.
- Let someone know when you will be home.
- Do not walk to the car alone. Check back seats, around the car and look for any tampering with the car.
- Find someone who will give you positive support when you feel down.

Your Home

- Change the locks on doors and windows.
- Install smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, motion-detector lights.
- Install a security system and rope ladders for the second floor.
- Do not put your name on an apartment directory.
- Always keep a cell phone and phone numbers nearby.
- If you must return to the home you shared with your former partner, arrange for a police escort.

Your Children

- Do not go to exchanges with the other parent by yourself. Have a support person with you, meet in a public place or use the school or a supervised exchange program as a buffer.
- Teach children exactly what to do during an emergency, such as go to a neighbour's or call 911. Teach them how to make these calls. Rehearse with them what to say when they call for help.
- Create a code word, so children know when or how to react.
- Help children know a safe place in the house (with a lock and a phone) to go to in an emergency.
- Teach your children how to use collect calling.
- Pick a safe place to meet children outside the house and be sure they know how to get there.
- Teach children to let you know when someone is at the door rather than answering it.
- Do not run to your children if you are being attacked.

If you have been sexually assaulted:

- Go to the hospital before taking a shower or bath.
- Keep all the clothing you were wearing at the time.
- Call the police.

General Information about Restraining and Emergency Intervention Orders for Saskatchewan

This and other information is available at: www.saskatchewan.ca/victimsservices.

There are many different types of orders a court can make that direct one person to have no contact with another person. The orders have different names and different processes, but they have the same purpose – to protect a person who has been the victim of violence and/or is afraid for their personal safety. These orders may contain a variety of temporary conditions to enhance the safety of victims.

There are several laws in place that are designed to assist and protect people experiencing violence. The type of order you should seek will depend on the urgency of the situation and your safety needs. If you are being harassed or your partner/ex-partner is being violent to you, you may think about practical solutions such as changing your locks, blocking or changing your phone number, or blocking their number and email address. If the violence escalates, you may want to apply for a restraining or emergency intervention order (EIO).

To talk about whether an EIO would help keep you and your family safe, contact the police, Victim Services, Mobile Crisis, or a lawyer. The types of non-contact orders are described below, and they are set out in Saskatchewan's *Victim of Interpersonal Violence Act*, *The Queen's Bench Act*, *The Children's Law Act*, *The Family Property Act*, and the *Criminal Code*.

Emergency Intervention Orders

- Available when violence or threatening behavior occurs between family members and they are in immediate danger.
- There must be a need for immediate protection.
- If police investigate a domestic disturbance, the investigating officer can obtain an EIO at any time of day or night.
- This can be used to remove someone from the home and prevent their return for a specified number of days.
- The EIO must be reviewed by a King's Bench justice within three working days of being granted. If the judge has concerns about the EIO, they can ask to hear from either you or the other party. If the judge has no concerns, they will confirm the order. When the other party is served with a copy of the EIO, they may object to it. They will then have an opportunity to present evidence to the court.
- If a person does not follow an EIO, they can be arrested and must then appear before a Provincial Court. If they are found to have breached the order, they can be fined or jailed.

King's Bench Restraining Orders

These orders are for less urgent situations.

- The application is done on notice to the other party. You can apply directly in the Court of King's Bench for a Restraining Order either under *The Queen's Bench Act* or *The Children's Law Act*.
- If the victim and person using violence were in a family relationship, the application can be made under *The Children's Law Act*.
- In other circumstances, such as dating situations, the application should be made under *The Queen's Bench Act*.
- They usually contain restrictions (recognizance) about contacting the victim either directly or indirectly and not going to any place the victim usually goes to, such as their home, work or child's school.
- There must be violence, threats of violence, or other actions that make you afraid for your physical safety.
- A restraining order should not be used to settle property disputes. If the issue is who will remain in the home, the proper application is for an order granting Exclusive Possession of the Family Home under *The Family Property Act*.
- If a Restraining Order is breached, the remedy differs depending on the Act used to make the application.

Victim Assistance Orders

These orders are for less-urgent situations.

- A Victim Assistance Order can be granted to give the applicant exclusive possession of the family home and prevent the other party from coming near the home. Victim Assistance Orders can prevent one party from communicating with the other or provide compensation to the victim of an assault.
- Exclusive Possession of the Family Home Order:
 - o Available to parties who are separating and have made applications to the court about the division of property.
 - o This is intended as an interim remedy to resolve disputes about who will remain in the home and who will leave. It is not to be used to divide assets.
 - o You do not have to show that there has been violence.
 - o The factors considered are which party will be most inconvenienced by a move, and what is in the best interests of the children.
 - o Parties can apply for exclusive possession of other assets, such as the family vehicle.
 - o A \$200 filing fee applies if an action for division of property has not yet begun.

Peace Bond

- Can be obtained through the criminal process for non-emergency situations.
- A complaint is made to police; the accused is arrested and given a notice to appear in court. At court the accused is asked if they will agree to a peace bond. If they will, the bond is prepared for them to sign and the matter is ended.
- If they will not sign, the matter is set for trial (several weeks or months later). If the trial judge finds that the accused has done something to make the complainant reasonably fear for their safety, then a peace bond will be ordered.
- The peace bond does not create a criminal record.
- It will be in place for up to a year. It has conditions that the person may not contact the complainant, and it may have other conditions as well.
- If breached, the person is charged with breach of a peace bond, which is a criminal offence. The trial may be several weeks or months after the breach.

Bail Conditions and Criminal Order

- When a person is arrested for crimes – such as assault, stalking, mischief, attempted murder, uttering threats, etc. – their bail or release conditions usually include a term that they have no contact with the complainant.
- If the person breaches the condition, they can have their bail revoked and spend the rest of their time awaiting trial in jail.
- When a person is convicted of an offence like those listed above, the sentence often includes a term of probation. The Probation Order can include a condition that the person has no contact with the complainant.

Supervised Visitation and Exchange

Information adapted from Family Justice Services Supervised Visitation and Exchange Program, Ministry of Justice and Attorney General.

Supervised Visitation

Except in exceptional circumstances, the court will generally consider it to be in children's best interest to have contact with both parents. Sometimes – even in exceptional circumstances such as parental addictions, interpersonal violence, child abuse, limited parenting capacity, or a parent who is a flight risk – contact may be maintained through supervised visitation. Supervision may occur with a family member or neutral third party, or it may be ordered by the court to occur through a formalized Supervised Visitation Program. Supervised visitation will typically be time limited and scheduled to occur on designated dates at specific times. If safety is an issue, a supervised visitation program may be the best option. In less critical situations, there may be greater flexibility if supervised visitation can occur outside the structure of a formalized program. In some circumstances parents and children may not have seen each other for a significant period of time, and in these situations, supervised visitation can provide a process for reunification while offering emotional safety and support.

Benefits of supervised visitation:

- Provides physical safety when there is a concern about children's well-being during visitation.
- Provides emotional safety by limiting discussion to appropriate topics.
- Prevents quizzing or manipulation of children.
- Provides a space for the visiting parent and child without interference from the other parent.
- Provides protection to the visiting parent from unwarranted allegations.
- Provides accountability through a formal schedule and documentation.

Supervised Exchange

The supervised exchange of children can be beneficial when the relationship between parents is highly conflicted. It can offer safety and protection from parental conflict and reduce stress for children as they transition between parents. In some situations, exchanges of children can be accomplished at school or daycare without contact between parents, or they can be buffered through a neutral third party or family member. In more volatile situations, exchanges may be supervised through a formalized supervised exchange program.

Benefits of supervised exchange:

- Allows children to maintain a relationship with both parents.
- Provides safety due to a lack of contact between parents.
- Protects children from parental conflict.
- Reduces risk and stress to all family members.
- Provides accountability through a formal schedule and documentation.



Ask a Lawyer

Frequently Asked Questions in High Conflict Situations

Several experienced family law lawyers were asked these common questions. The following is a compilation of their responses. It must be stressed that all situations have unique circumstances, and **these responses should only be used for information purposes. They cannot be interpreted as legal advice for any specific situation.**

I think my child is in danger from the other parent because I am sure he is driving around with her when he has had too much to drink. I have called the authorities, such as the police or Children's Services, but they cannot do anything if they don't catch him in the act. What can I do?

If you have a court order that requires you to turn the child over to the other parent for his parenting time, no one – especially a lawyer – can or should advise you to disregard the order. If you choose to ignore the directions in a court order without very good reasons for doing so, you could be held in contempt of court. The consequences for being in contempt include payment of fines or expenses, jail time, or changes to the court order that favor the other person.

If there is no court order in place, or if you think the current court order does not adequately protect your child, you could ask the court for an order or to change the current one. You could also ask for conditions, such as supervision for access, drug testing, or restrictions on alcohol consumption. Depending on how emergent your situation is, you may be able to have the court consider your application with shortened or no notice to the other person. However, if you are going to ask this of the court, you should have reliable evidence (proof) that it is necessary.

If you believe your child is in immediate danger because the other parent appears drunk or under the influence of some substance, it is up to you to decide whether you are going to follow the existing court order or whether you should do anything else in the circumstances, such as calling the police. If you choose not to follow the order, you may have to explain to the court why you did not follow it. You can and should seek legal advice about your options.

It seems like judges are unable to make decisions, and it costs so much money to have a lawyer in court each time. Why does court get adjourned so often?

The problem generally isn't that judges are unable to make decisions. A judge can only proceed on the information before them, and they take very seriously the requirement to make the best decision for the children.

Court may not be able to proceed on a given day for several reasons; the parents may give different versions of events and it is difficult for the judge to make the best decision for the children, one of the parties isn't ready to proceed, it may take more time than is available on a given day, or there has been a change in circumstances. Often the courts want people to attempt other forms of dispute resolution before proceeding to trial.

The real key is for the parties to attempt to resolve as many of the issues as they can between them. Sometimes, due to the history of the parties, tolerance is reduced to almost nothing, even for the slightest things. Negotiation is critical. Often there are only one or two real issues that need to be decided, but neither parent is willing to negotiate on anything. This results in more issues being decided by the court, which takes significantly more time to complete.

Obtain reliable legal information about the issue you are facing. Try as many other methods to resolve the dispute as you can – such as mediation, four-way meetings with lawyers, and even direct negotiation when safe. The Dispute Resolution Office can provide information and help you access dispute resolution alternatives.

If court is necessary, be prepared, reduce the issues in dispute as much as possible, and make it your goal to only use the court to resolve the issues that you and the other parent cannot resolve by yourselves.

The other parent is emotionally abusive to my child, how can I protect her?

The first thing you can do is be the best parent you can be while she is with you. Don't spend a lot of time questioning her about what is going on at the other parent's place. Time with you should be calm and consistent. If things are happening that you should know about, you are much more likely to be told if the child is in that kind of environment, than if she is subjected to the third degree after every visit with the other parent.

Secondly, be aware that kids will often say what they think you want to hear, so be careful what vibes you give off and what you say about the other parent. Kids may also overstate things to get sympathy or to get their own way. It may well be that proper and normal discipline is conveyed to you as yelling or other abusive behaviour. Parents parent differently. Each parent has a different personality, so no doubt you each will say things differently. Know your child. The age of the child is relevant in determining the accuracy of what they are saying to you. Verify to your satisfaction that the version you are getting is accurate before taking any additional steps. Part of that process is having a conversation with the other parent.

If you are satisfied that something serious is indeed happening, you should see if the other parent is willing to attend counseling with you and the child or alone with the child. There are many resources available to help your child cope with a difficult parental relationship, such as books, DVDs and groups.

You may apply to the court to limit the other parent's time with your child. The court will usually maximize time with each parent unless it is determined that this is not in the best interest of the children. These are often he said/she said situations, and it is difficult for the court to know what is really occurring with the child. Before you go to court, it is a good idea to ensure you have evidence that is believable and preferably independent of you or the child. A lawyer can advise you about the evidence you should bring before the court.

A restraining order is preventing me from contacting the other parent, how can I arrange time to be with my children?

If the restraining order is against you, your lawyer can try to arrange times on your behalf. If there is a review date for the restraining order or EIO, you or your lawyer can ask the court at the review to order provisions specifying how access arrangements can be made and specifying that you can be in the same room with a mediator, lawyers or counselor for the purpose of addressing, and hopefully, resolving issues. If you do not have a lawyer or an opportunity in court to revise the order, you can contact the lawyer for the other parent if the other parent has a lawyer. Do not contact the other parent directly or even through a friend or intermediary unless the court order says you can.

Failing all of the above, it may be necessary to bring an application to the court to address access issues and to amend the restraining order. It is always wise to get legal advice about your specific situation. The Family Law Information Centre can help provide the information you need to make your application to the court.

If the restraining order is against the other person, you should not try to contact them even to make arrangements to see the children unless the court order says you can. If you do, you may later have a hard time getting help from the police to enforce the restraining order because they may think you are not serious about it. You can make arrangements through lawyers or ask the court to make an order that says how access is to be arranged.

Finally, if the restraining order was granted for good cause, consider getting counseling to address it. Counseling will likely help, reduce the chances of something similar happening again, and make seeing your kids easier. Living under a restraining order is highly stressful, and doing whatever it takes to get rid of it while ensuring there is never another one is the way to go. See the "Whom to Call" list at the beginning of this book for more information.

Five High Conflict Personalities

And a Few Tips for Managing Them

Adapted from a 2013 presentation by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. (www.highconflictinstitute.com).

High Conflict Personality Types	Specific Tips
“Love-You, Hate-You” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of abandonment: clingy and manipulative. • Seeks revenge and vindication. • Dramatic mood swings. • Sudden and intense anger that is out of proportion to what happened. • Impulsive, risk-taking, self-destructive behaviour. 	“Love-You, Hate-You” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen with empathy. Stay calm and matter-of-fact when they get angry (and they will). • Keep an arms-length relationship: not too rejecting and not too close. • Have clear boundaries – when you’re available and when you are not. • Be consistent and predictable.
“I’m Very Superior” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being inferior or powerless. • Believes in a very superior self-image. • Absorbed in self, own needs, own viewpoint. • Feels entitled to special treatment. • Lacks empathy for others. 	“I’m Very Superior” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be respectful and resist insulting them (even though you will be tempted because of their arrogance and insensitivity to others). • Resist their efforts to receive special treatment. Reassure them they are important, but that you have to follow the plans, agreements and court orders. • Thank them for some positive efforts and parenting skills.
“Always Dramatic” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fears being ignored and left out. • Strives to be the centre of attention. • Constantly dramatic and theatrical. • Exaggerates and may make up stories. • Difficulty focusing on tasks or making decisions. 	“Always Dramatic” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t get hooked by their stories. You can always interrupt the drama by moving on to another important topic. • Plan a time for discussion about the children or the details of the separation. • Ensure the parenting plan empowers them to manage themselves without you looking after them.
“Con Artist” Type <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being dominated. • Drives to dominate others in weaker positions. • Disregards social rules and laws. • Constantly lies and deceives, even when easily caught (they don’t keep track of their lies). • Lacks remorse and some may even enjoy hurting others. 	“Con Artist” Type <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid trusting people who say “trust me” a lot. Maintain a healthy skepticism. Ask for documentation. • Pay attention to your gut feelings – they are often the first to tell you to be wary. • Sometimes they are dangerous. Don’t accept being bullied – get assistance.
“I’ll Never Trust You” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being exploited. • Endless doubts about friends, professionals, etc. • Misinterprets ordinary events or comments as demeaning or threatening. • Bears long-term grudges. • Misperceives others as attacking them, so they counter-attack first (pre-emptive strikes). • Fears and expects conspiracies against themselves. 	“I’ll Never Trust You” Types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be as non-threatening as possible. • Be reassuring, but don’t expect them to trust you. • Don’t push them to open up about things. • Respect their caution and desire to only reveal what they have to.

