



Forget Harmony, Settle for Peace

An oft-common mistake working with high conflict separated parents is to move them towards getting along and working cooperatively for the well-being of their children. It is a lofty and noble goal unfortunately far beyond the grasp of folks who would likely prefer to see the other disappear for a more immediate and permanent solution to the conflict. The more they are pushed together, the more intense the conflict.

What needs to be understood here is that parents in high-conflict are actually enmeshed in each other's lives, bogged down in the minutiae of complaints. Their only manner of engagement is the ongoing settling of scores as each continually takes offence with the other. These parents frequently evoke the phrase, "The best interests of the children". However, their own efforts at self-protection through retribution and retaliation undermine any real understanding of the child's best interest. The child's best interest is superseded and fused with the self-interest of the parent.

In lieu of cooperative parenting, where both are helped to get along, the more achievable goal is to help the parents disengage. They need help to see the futility of lobbing bombs that only serve to keep the conflict alive, commonly to the tummy-ache, restless nights or limited concentration at school of their children. Rather than cooperative parenting, these folks require clear boundaries and rules for engagement when engagement is absolutely necessary. It may require the parents to understand that both shall parent according to their own style and customs (objectively assuming non-abusive or neglectful behaviour).

Parents will argue that their divergent parenting styles and expectations will confuse the child. Here parents are reminded that kids adjust to many different expectations and behavioural styles. They learn not to run on the deck at the swimming pool, yet to run full out on the soccer field. They learn that with one teacher they must put up their hand to ask a question while the other teacher encourages them to speak out and assert themselves. Hence children do learn the different expectations and styles of various care-providers, teachers and coaches. It is only when one butts in to set expectations for another, anarchy reigns and conflict ensues. One teacher cannot tell another how to run his class. One parent cannot tell the other how to parent.

To achieve parental disengagement, a parenting plan must be constructed that addresses and anticipates as many areas of concern and potential areas of overlap as possible. Clear boundaries must be established as well as the respective spans of authority under given situations. Here the devil is in the detail. Any matter left to chance will be the fodder for a new round of bombs.

Wherever possible, these parents must be kept separate and apart. They are likely unable to resist a provocative tone, let alone raising an issue when in each other's company such as during time of exchange.

The need for communication is inevitable however. Communication will likely require an intermediary, such as a Parenting Coordinator. The parents are likely best to use email, with copy to the PC. In more difficult situations, the parents may be required to have their communications vetted first whereby the parents may be taught how to write a more appropriate communiqué.

Disengagement lowers conflict. A well-constructed parenting plan facilitates disengagement.

Understanding that it is the parental conflict that is determinative of poor outcomes for children of divorce, the goal is to limit the opportunity for conflict, not encourage parents, keen on each other's destruction, to get along. This is a more realistic and feasible goal, truly in the best interest of the child.

Don't worry about separated parents in high conflict learning to live in harmony, but learning to leave each other alone to at least live in peace.

This will free the children from their conflict to then attend to the tasks of childhood.

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