

Parent Information Program Participant Package

Check out the NS Family Law website at
www.nsfamilylaw.ca
for family law information and resources

November 2015

Contents

Introduction	3
How conflict affects families	4
How conflict affects children	4
The Effects of Separation on Children: Ages and Stages	6
Children with Special Needs	9
Talking to children about a separation or divorce	10
Options for resolving a dispute	12
Negotiation	12
Going to court	13
Effective Communication	14
Don't share information about adult issues with your child	15
Using a business-like communication style	15
Active listening	16
Closed Questions	17
Open Questions	18
Perception – how we see and interpret things	19
Paraphrasing & Summarizing	19
'I' Statements	21
Other communication skills	22
Anger	24
Putting it all together	25
Parenting arrangements	26
Child support	28
Worksheet: What Would Life Be Like Without This Conflict?	29
Worksheet: Understanding Anger	30
Setting Boundaries	31
Worksheet: Setting Personal Boundaries	35
Disengaging from a past relationship	36
When a child refuses to go for a visit	41
Extended Families	43
New Partner Issues	45
My notes	46

Introduction

While most children can adapt to their parents being apart, ongoing conflict between parents can negatively affect children's development and relationships, including their ability to have good relationships with others when they become adults.

Intense or repeated stressful events during childhood can add up to be increasingly harmful to children. These experiences can leave emotional scars that could last a lifetime. These stressful events can include:

- witnessing ongoing conflict between parents, like overhearing arguments or name-calling
- being used as a 'pawn' or 'go-between' in the parents' relationship
- being told a parent's complaints about the other parent
- witnessing or overhearing violence or controlling behaviours between family members.

Research shows that the more of these negative experiences children are exposed to or have to live with, the more likely they are to have mental health and relationship difficulties as they get older. But, **it's never too late to make changes.**

Your challenge is to build a cooperative relationship with each other as parents, different than your former relationship as partners. It's important to get support as you sort through your feelings.

Learning to manage your emotions will put you in a better position to talk to the other parent. Try to find positive, constructive support. Relying on friends and family is sometimes unhelpful if they only encourage your negative feelings about the other parent and don't help you find new ways of looking at your situation. Talking to a neutral person, like a counselor, can sometimes help.

As you move through this Program, ask yourself these questions:

1. What kind of parent do I want to be?
2. How do I want my children to think of me?
3. How do I want my children to remember our separation?

Complete the 'What Would Life Be Like Without This Conflict?' worksheet to get a better idea about how conflict may be affecting you and your children.

Not all children who have been exposed to conflict will suffer negative effects if adults recognize the danger and take steps to protect their children. Children can be shielded from conflict and YOU are the most important protection your child has.

Children are protected most when parents and other adults in their lives:

- listen to and pay attention to them, and provide consistent support and encouragement
- keep conflict away from children's eyes and ears
- continue to actively parent by being aware of and involved in what is going on in their children's lives
- surround the children with positive, caring family and friends
- support and encourage the children's relationships with their other parent

- help children cope with the changes in their lives caused by their parents' separation.

Children need to be protected from the unhealthy stress of conflict. It is best if both parents help to protect the child from conflict and stress – but it only takes one parent to have a positive effect!

How conflict affects families

'Conflict' means a disagreement or argument, usually one that goes on for a while. Conflict takes a toll on every member of the family. Parents who are in conflict with each other may:

- spend a lot of energy every day dealing with the conflict
- spend time away from their family, friends, and favourite activities to deal with the conflict
- feel like efforts to reduce the conflict have no effect
- repeat the same arguments over and over
- try to avoid contacting or talking to the other parent
- go to court to resolve conflicts, only to have the same conflicts continue or new ones develop
- spend more money on lawyers, court filing fees, and strategies to enforce court orders
- lose income from missing work to deal with the conflict
- feel emotionally drained and physically exhausted
- feel a strain in their relationship with the child, and their family's relationship with the child, because of the conflict

How conflict affects children

Children can easily feel 'stuck' in the middle of conflict between their parents. Some of the ways this happens is when the child:

- is told the other parent is to blame for the separation
- is told details of the separation, or what is going on in court
- is shown the details of court documents, like affidavits
- is told about a parent's refusal to pay child support, or that they pay late or less than required
- gets 'pumped' for information about the other parent
- is asked to make decisions about important issues like visiting time with their other parent or grandparents
- hears negative things said about one of their parents from the other parent
- sees or hears arguments or fights between their parents
- gets presents and other rewards to try to 'win' their loyalty and affection
- is sent to or returned from visits dirty, hungry, or thirsty
- is relied on to give emotional support to a parent
- sees a parent rolling their eyes or making faces when the other parent calls

Some of the things that children may do in reaction to experiencing conflict between their parents include:

- playing one parent against the other
- trying to take on adult responsibilities around the house
- trying to provide adult emotional support to a parent
- telling parents what they want to hear, even when it's not true or is the opposite of what the child has told the other parent.

All of these reactions can have long-term consequences on children's mental health. However, this last point is very important for parents to understand, particularly when they take steps in court based on what the child has told them, because this behaviour is common. For example, a child might tell each parent that they want to live with them. The child might be saying this:

- to avoid hurting a parent's feelings
- to make the parent feel better
- because it's easier than telling the truth
- because it helps avoid an argument
- to obtain the parent's approval.

When children live in fear and worry - which is what happens when there is ongoing conflict between their parents - the stress affects how their brains develop. A child may begin to interpret interactions with other people as if each one could blow up into a conflict situation, like the kind of conflict the child experiences at home. As this type of response becomes routine, your child may find it increasingly difficult to trust people and be close to others.

Over time, negative, unhealthy stress harms the brain. It can affect the brain's basic structure and lead to learning delays, anxiety, addictions, memory problems and other health problems. Since brains continue to develop until a person is in his or her twenties, even older children can be affected by the unhealthy stress caused by their parents' conflict.

The Effects of Separation on Children: Ages and Stages

It is best for children if there is cooperation between parents. If cooperation is not possible, your goal should be to at least have no conflict, or to reduce any conflict between you and the other parent.

When families are stuck in conflict, children may:

- feel unsafe, unhappy or uncomfortable
- spend a lot of energy trying to manage their parents' conflict and adapt to the mood and expectations in each parent's home
- struggle to manage conflicting feelings of love and loyalty for each parent
- look for comfort and stability outside their immediate family
- keep other aspects of their lives - like their friends and activities - away from the family
- act out or withdraw from activities they normally enjoy
- experience negative long-term outcomes, such as missing school or dropping out, teen pregnancy, criminal activity, and trouble trusting other people

In many cases, parents blame each other for causing the conflict. In other cases, the children blame themselves for causing the conflict and feel responsible for making things better.

The long-term outcome for children whose parents are apart is related to how their parents, and other adults in their lives, handle those difficulties. The most damaging behaviours are:

- separating a child from one of their parents or interfering with a child's contact with the other parent or extended family members
- fighting in front of the child or where the child can hear it (yelling, swearing, blaming, threatening)
- negatively influencing the child's opinion about their other parent
- choosing to be uncooperative
- putting a child in the middle to communicate or to get information

In this section, we will discuss some behaviours that children may demonstrate when they are feeling stressed or upset. These behaviours are broken into four age groups: birth to 3 years, 4 years to 7 years, 8 years to 12 years, and 13 years to 19 years. At the end of this section, we will discuss things that parents can do to protect children from this stress and help them through difficult times.

All children demonstrate some of the behaviours discussed in this section, and this may not mean that there is anything wrong. You know your own child or grandchild. Be aware of sudden changes in their personality and behaviour. Parenting is a tough job even when parents are together. It can be even more challenging when parents are apart.

It's important that parents recognize separation as a potential loss for their children. It's normal for children to grieve and be upset and to experience some, or even many, of the behaviours discussed here. Every child may express their grief differently. If the child's behaviour becomes disruptive to their everyday lives, however, this may be something to watch out for.

Remember: even if the other parent won't stop engaging in these behaviours, it only takes one parent to protect a child from the negative effects of conflict!

Birth – 3 years

Very young children can sense tension, but can't understand it. They may not understand the angry words said between their parents, but they feel those angry emotions. They are at risk for emotional and physical problems when they feel conflict and hostility in their environment.

Things to watch out for:

- sudden changes in behaviour, excessive crying, failure to advance to the next stage (for example, a delay in learning to talk or toilet train), regressive behaviours (for example, when a talking child stops speaking), not eating, aggressive behaviour

4 years to 7 years

Children at this age have limited ability to understand separation or divorce. Because they understand relationships in self-centred terms, they often feel they caused an event to happen, like their parents' break up. They may also feel that their parents' worries and problems are their fault.

Things to watch out for:

- eating less or more than usual, refusing favourite foods, refusing to play with other children, acting out, not expressing much emotion, depression, extreme pleasing/helpfulness

8 years to 12 years

Children at this age have a growing understanding of human relationships and a realistic understanding of what it means when their parents are apart. However, they are still not able to deal with everything they experience. At this age, children are forming their morals and values, largely based on what they learn from their parents and other adults.

Things to watch out for:

- withdrawing from social activities, anger, needing to please and being willing to sacrifice their own needs to maintain good relationships with both parents, manipulation (playing one parent against the other)

13 years to 19 years

Teenagers are developing their own identities, separate from those of their parents. It's tough being a teenager even in the best of circumstances. The loss of a parent/child relationship can be particularly painful and unsettling.

Things to watch out for:

- extreme hostility or aggression, self-harming behaviours, declining grades or dropping out of school, drug or alcohol use, social isolation, losing interest in favourite activities, apathy (not caring about things, lack of interest)

All children show some of the behaviours listed here, and that's quite normal. However, you may need to keep a closer eye on things when a child is showing a lot of these behaviours at once, or for a long time, and it begins to affect their daily lives.

There are things that parents can do to help children through difficult times, and to reduce these behaviours.

- Provide routine and predictability
 - For younger children, this may mean having the same wake times and bedtimes, meal and bathing schedule, and daycare setting
 - For older children, this may mean having the same extracurricular activities, homework schedule, and curfew
 - Allow the child to maintain their relationships with friends, extended family, and community groups when possible
- Be patient and reassuring
 - Keep your expectations realistic and be flexible – the occasional meltdown is normal!
 - Give physical love and comfort, like hugs and rocking (if appropriate – some special needs children may not like this kind of contact)
 - Keep the focus on what is good, right, and unique about the child. When the child does something good, tell them!
- Help the child feel emotionally secure
 - let your child know they can talk to you about anything, and prove it by being calm and not judging, no matter what they say
 - be aware of your child's emotions and what they need
 - for example, if your child seems upset, acknowledge that they seem sad, and ask if there's anything you can do
- Set boundaries
 - all children need structure, and to know what is expected of them – even teenagers!
 - let children know what behaviours are expected of them, and what behaviours are not acceptable
 - set expectations and appropriate consequences

- for example, you may use a time-out with a younger child, or remove certain privileges from an older child, like being able to use the car
- Respect children’s feelings and their relationship with their other parent
 - you may not agree with something the child says, but they are entitled to their feelings
 - support and promote the child’s positive relationships with the other parent and extended family members
 - do not use the child to pass messages between you and the other parent. This is a sure way to make them feel caught in the middle of your dispute.
 - Do not talk badly about the other parent, ESPECIALLY in front of the child or where the child can hear it. Remember: your child sees himself or herself as part of you, and part of the other parent. Children feel loyal to both parents. If you say something bad about their other parent, the child may see themselves as ‘bad’ too.
- Keep adult concerns away from children
 - Do not rely on your child to provide you with emotional support
 - Keep adult issues away from children’s eyes and ears – this includes talking about the separation or divorce, anything related to court, or money issues
 - Remember: no matter how mature your child may seem, it is not appropriate to burden them with this information

Children with Special Needs

Many children with special needs, particularly those with disorders affecting their mental health or intellect, have a high need for stability and security. Depending on the nature of the child’s disorder, the need for sameness may be so important that the child must slowly work toward spending time out of the home he or she has grown up in. If the child moves between your homes, it may be necessary to take the child’s clothing, toys and equipment from home to home. It may not be possible to change the child’s schools or extracurricular activities.

Children with special needs often need:

- consistency and regularity: strictly maintained routines and predictability in their day-to-day lives (like the same medication, therapy, meal, nap and bedtimes)
- familiarity: maintain the child’s environment, or as many common elements of the environment as you can, whenever possible (like the same toys, toiletries, belongings, caregivers); it may be important for the child to have a photograph of the other parent in each home; maintain the routine of the child’s environment and activities outside the home
- patience and reassurance: keep your expectations realistic and be flexible (meltdowns should be expected), give lots of physical love and comforting activities (like hugs and rocking) *if appropriate for your child*, reassure the child that the other parent loves him or her even though he or she isn’t there.

Note: if you and the other parent have differences in opinion about medical treatment for your child with special needs, these things should be discussed with medical professionals.

Talking to children about a separation or divorce

For younger children (up to about age 5): It is important to find a way to talk to your young child about your separation. Children of this age often assume that something they did (like spilling a glass of milk, or breaking something) caused the separation. If possible, you and the other parent should plan how the talk will go and work on the language that you will use when you talk to the child. Whatever you decide to say, it is very important to tell the child that both of you love him or her and will always love him or her, and that the change in your relationship won't change anything in the child's relationships with either of you.

For children from about 6 to 12 years of age: These children also need to be told about your separation. Children in this age range are likely to understand what it means to lose a relationship, and they will have friends and classmates who only have one parent or whose parents are not together. Although you can use more grown up language and ideas when you are talking to these children, you must not blame either parent for the separation. Your message should be that both of you have made the decision to live separately.

As with younger children, your key messages should be that although your relationship with the other parent has changed, nothing has changed in the children's relationships with each of you, and that you both love them and will always love them.

For teenagers, 13 years of age and up: Teenagers also deserve to be told about your separation. They will likely have lost a relationship of their own, and will be able to relate. However, teenagers are not adults. **No matter how mature your child may seem, or may want to seem, do not burden them with information related to your separation,** or involve them in your emotional reaction to the separation or your dispute with the other parent.

Teenagers also deserve to be consulted about decisions that need to be made, and as teenagers get older sometimes their wishes should be followed. However:

- you *must not* involve the child in the disagreement between yourself and the other parent, or explain your own preferences
- you *must not* make threats or offer the child gifts, special activities or incentives to express the preference you want
- you should talk about the pros and cons of a decision as neutrally and accurately as possible
- you *must not* trash talk the other parent.

For children with special needs: You should consult your family doctor or the child's pediatrician for advice about how to explain your separation to the child – or whether you should explain it at all - and what your child will need in order to handle your separation as well as possible.

Options for resolving a dispute

There are many options that parents can try to resolve their disputes. These options include negotiating together, negotiating with help, or going to court. The options that are best for you and the other parent depend on your situation. If you get along reasonably well with the other parent and can communicate with them, negotiating may be something to try. If your communication with the other parent is a bit strained or you need some assistance to reach an agreement, negotiating with help from a neutral third party may help. Some of the options for negotiating with help include conciliation, mediation, and settlement conferencing. These options are described later in this section.

There are some situations where going to court may be the best or only option. These situations often include high levels of conflict or violence between the parties.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a direct discussion of differences between the people involved in an effort to resolve these issues. Negotiation can take place between parents over coffee, through a lawyer or mediator, or through other types of dispute resolution. There will always be some negotiation between parents who are involved with their children. No lawyer or court can deal with all aspects of parenting. You will always be dealing with each other if you are both parenting.

Some of the issues you may need to discuss when you are parenting apart are:

- what the parenting schedule will be
- who will attend the children's events, like parent-teacher conferences, birthday parties and sports events
- the parenting rules that will be common in both homes, like bedtimes and homework expectations

Caution! Sometimes talking it out through direct negotiation isn't possible. Addictions or untreated mental health issues can prevent someone from being able to negotiate clearly. One parent may not be able to negotiate at a given point in time because he or she is experiencing intense emotions relating to the end of the relationship. Do not continue to negotiate if you or the other parent is unable!

Only try to negotiate directly with the other person if it is safe to do so and the discussion isn't likely to result in a threat to your safety. If there is a history of family violence, it may be best not to try to talk about the issue at all.

Here are steps you can take to try to resolve your dispute:

1. Decide to let this one go. Some battles are not worth fighting. Decide how important the issue is to you or for the children. This can be tricky, but parents often find themselves fighting over issues that are really unimportant, like about how a child's hair should be cut.

If you decide to stop fighting about an issue for the sake of peace or because the issue isn't worth the conflict, come to terms with your decision and stop bringing up the topic.

2. Try to work it out by talking together. Raise the issue at a good time and talk about the rules that could resolve the dispute. Most of the time these discussions will require each person to compromise and will result in a rule that is not entirely either parent's preferred outcome.
3. Negotiate with help. You may choose to negotiate with the help of a professional like a mediator, a lawyer, or a trained court officer, who can help you reduce conflict and negotiate the issue.

Some of the ways you can negotiate with help are listed here:

- **Court-based dispute resolution, or 'conciliation'** is a process where both parties, either in separate meetings or together, meet with a court officer who will help the parties to focus on their situation and consider the appropriate options available to them in their case.
- **Mediation** is a voluntary process where a trained, impartial mediator helps the parties to reach agreements about family law issues. The mediator will assist each person to talk about their needs and issues, and will help the parties negotiate to resolve the issues in appropriate cases.
- **Settlement conferencing** is a voluntary process to determine if the parties can reach their own agreement on the issues with the help of a judge. Settlement conferences may be a good opportunity to sort out your issues without having to go to a formal hearing. If you do not reach an agreement during your conference, the judge involved may still comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each party's proposal, and may give an opinion on the likely outcome if the matter goes to a hearing.

If you feel the negotiations could cause a risk to your or someone else's safety, let the professional know. It may be important that you and the other parent are not in the same room together or that the negotiations not be in person.

Going to court

If the issue is too important to walk away from, but you and the other parent can't or are unlikely to be able to negotiate on your own or with help, the only way to resolve the issue may be to make an application to the court. Court may be the only solution when safety is a concern.

Taking an issue to court, however, does mean you are giving up control of the situation. When it comes to parenting, a judge must consider - as you should when negotiating - what is in the best interests of the children, not what is in the best interests of the parents, grandparents, or other adults involved in the situation.

Effective Communication

Children benefit when their parents have a respectful and cooperative relationship. This is even more important when their parents are not together.

Good communication is necessary to have a respectful and cooperative relationship with your child's other parent. In most cases, as parents, you will need to communicate about your children. As separated parents it is more challenging, yet even more important, that you maintain effective communication with each other. It's worth remembering that children often adopt the communication style of their parents, because that's the communication style they see every day.

Effective communication between parents focuses on what is important to everyone involved, especially the children, why the issues are important, and how the issues should be resolved.

Conflict often occurs about differences in opinion, beliefs, values and needs – and as a result of misunderstandings. How you manage your differences can either damage your relationship with the other parent, or make it better. Two ways you can manage conflict caused by differences are to practice the effective communication skills we will talk about in this session, and to find ways to effectively cope with strong emotions like anger.

It is often difficult to communicate with the other parent because of emotions such as pain, anger, fear, resentment, jealousy, loneliness, and abandonment. Parents who are separating often struggle with how to act around each other. Some try to avoid dealing with these difficulties by withdrawing and not speaking to the other parent, and others explode with angry confrontations and arguments.

You may be tempted to use your children to communicate with the other parent as a means of avoiding unpleasantness or conflict. However, using children to deliver messages creates problems for the children, who will feel torn and placed in the middle of your conflict. Children have loyalty to both parents and want to please you both. Even if it seems as though your children are not bothered, asking them to deliver messages will cause them harm by involving them in your conflict. Never communicate with the other parent through your child.

Don't share information about adult issues with your child

It is not appropriate to share EVERYTHING with your child. Children should not be burdened with the details of adult problems like money issues, court proceedings, or your negative feelings about the other parent, the other parent's family, or his or her new partner. This is true no matter how mature your child seems.

Involving children in these types of issues will create worry and stress for them. They may become scared about basic things that they should be able to count on, like where they're going to live or whether or not their basic needs can be met. It may also make them question whether you or their other parent is able to look after them. It could reflect on how they see themselves (for example, "if one of my parents is a bad person, then I must be a bad person too"). It also sets a bad example.

Using a business-like communication style

A first step in improving your communication may be re-thinking your relationship with the other parent. You need to separate your former role as a partner from your continuing role as a parent. It will be helpful to move from an intimate communication style to a business-like communication style.

An intimate relationship includes expecting each other to do certain things, without having to discuss these issues or write things down ~

- for example, you expect that you will both attend parent-teacher meetings together

A business-like relationship has no expectations, unless they've been agreed to or written down ~

- for example, your parenting plan may state that Parent A will attend fall parent-teacher meetings, and Parent B will attend spring parent-teacher meetings

An intimate relationship includes informal meetings and communication ~

- for example, discussing your child's report card together while sitting home in the evening

A business-like relationship has structured interactions and meetings with agendas ~

- for example, you may have negotiated and included in your parenting plan that the parent who gets the child's report card will email a copy to the other parent within 24 hours, and included a structured arrangement for discussing the report card within a set amount of time

An intimate relationship includes a lot of emotional and personal involvement ~

- for example, if your partner is participating in a marathon for charity, you will probably provide support to them by looking after the children while they train, making a donation to the cause, and cheering them on during the event

A business-like relationship has little personal involvement ~

- for example, if the other parent is participating in a marathon for charity, they may not even share this information with you, as it doesn't directly relate to your children and has no personal impact on you

An intimate relationship includes open discussions and sharing information ~

- for example, you will probably talk to your partner about how your day was when you get home, and about the big project you finished that day

A business-like relationship has limited sharing of information unless the information relates to parenting ~

- for example, you wouldn't talk to the other parent about how your day was at work, because this probably has nothing to do with your children

Active listening

Active listening is a way of communicating where you show the other person that you understand what they have said, without judging. Listening without criticizing is important to resolving conflicts and preventing them from getting worse. The key is to listen without judging what the speaker has said. Avoid defending your point of view and criticizing the other parent's statements.

Active listening helps the other parent feel understood, which makes it more likely they will listen to you. It also leads to better relationships and cooperation from others.

Active listening improves decision-making by providing more information. You will each benefit from knowing more about the other's experience. Active listening also helps us discover unexpected areas of agreement, which can lead to greater cooperation.

Active listening prevents us from saying or doing things we may regret later. It creates a delay between hearing and reacting.

Active listening does not mean having to agree with the other parent. It's about understanding the other parent's thoughts and feelings.

These tips will help you with active listening:

- Look interested, be interested
- Involve yourself by responding
- Stay focused on the problem
- Test and retest your understanding
- Evaluate what the other parent is saying
- Neutralize your feelings

Being a good active listener requires the use of:

- questioning
- paraphrasing
- summarizing

Sometimes, it's helpful to ask questions of the other person, to clarify what they are saying. Questions also confirm your understanding of what is being said, or may provide information that will help resolve the

dispute. It's important to know how to ask a question, though, so that you get the information you need without causing further conflict or making the other person feel that they're being 'pumped' for information.

There are two basic types of questions – closed questions, and open questions.

Closed Questions

The answers to closed questions give specific but limited information about a person or topic. Closed questions are generally those that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no' – for example, "Is she reading with you at your house?" Closed questions often begin with words like:

- "Do you..." ("Do you have the homework binder?")
- "Have you..." ("Have you had lunch?")
- "Are you..." ("Are you taking her to the game?")
- "Will you..." ("Will you pick up potatoes on your way over?")
- "Could you..." ("Could you drop him off 5 minutes later?")

Closed questions can appear sarcastic or hurtful if not worded carefully – for example, "Do you think you'll be on time?" or "Do you think you'll need some help packing her lunch?"

Closed questions can also appear to be leading questions, meaning that they suggest their own answer. For example, "Don't you think he is old enough for a sleepover?" or "You're still seeing him, aren't you?" Leading questions aren't very helpful because they don't give a lot of new information and often sound like an insult or an attack.

Closed questions, however, can be useful to focus a discussion or clarify an issue. For example, "Do you have five minutes to talk about his birthday present?" and "Have you registered him for kindergarten?" Both ask for a very precise answer without giving a lot of wiggle room.

Be careful using too many closed questions in a row, as this can sound like an interrogation and set an uncomfortable tone. It's better to mix in some open questions.

Pretend the other parent says "Sam is having trouble with math at school and may need a tutor." What would happen if you responded with a whole bunch of closed questions?

- "Is he failing math?"
- "Am I going to have to pay for a tutor?"
- "Will you be able to take him to the lessons?"
- "Have you talked to his teacher?"
- "Could we start lessons next month?"

Do you think the other parent would respond well to these types of questions? Is there a better way to ask them?

Open Questions

Open questions are questions that don't suggest their own answer and require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Open questions often sound like neutral requests for information and, because you're not making any assumptions, can come across as an invitation to have a conversation.

Using open questions can often be more helpful than using closed questions, especially if they're carefully worded. Open questions allow the other person to give more detailed answers. Open questions often begin with

- "How..." ("How did you fix her bicycle?")
- "What..." ("What can we do about his rash?")
- "Who..." ("Who is coaching her soccer team this year?")
- "Where..." ("Where will you be taking him over the holidays?")
- "When..." ("When is her school concert?")

'Why' can sometimes be used to ask an open question, however, you need to be careful. Depending on what you're asking, you may be putting the other parent on the defensive. For example, asking someone "Why on earth did you do that!?" is not an effective open question. A good open 'why' question would be something like "Why did the teacher assign extra homework today?" or "Why doesn't the fridge door close properly?"

Going back to Sam's trouble with his math class, how do you think the other parent would react if instead of a series of closed questions, you asked open questions like those on the right-hand side of this table?

Closed questions	Open questions
"Is he failing math?"	"How do you think we could resolve this problem?"
"Am I going to have to pay for a tutor?" "Will you be able to take him to the lessons?"	"What options do we have for getting him extra help?"
"Have you talked to his teacher?" "Could we start lessons next month?"	"I know that you and I can figure this out. What are your thoughts on how we can help him?"

Notice in these last few examples that 'we' statements are being used. 'We' statements use 'us', 'we' and 'our', and phrases like 'you and I', to talk about problems.

- "I'm hoping that we can work this out together."
- "It's up to us to deal with the bully on his hockey team. What should we do?"
- "How do you think that we can divide our summer holidays?"
- "I know that you and I can figure this out."
- "How can we help our children deal with your mother's death?"

Statements like these are inclusive because they talk about you and the other parent, and how both of you can deal with a problem. They suggest a team approach to parenting and, just like open questions, they don't make a lot of assumptions.

Remember to refer to the children as "our children" rather than "my children" – that's a sure way to get the other parent upset and make that parent feel that you are trying to shut him or her out.

Perception – how we see and interpret things

It is important to be aware of your interpretation of the other parent's communications and actions. People often have different interpretations of the same words or events because they see things through their own values, experiences, upbringing, and beliefs. Your thoughts about the other parent's behaviour are also influenced by your emotional state and the history you have with the other parent. For example, if the other parent doesn't show up or call when they're supposed to, you will probably interpret this situation very differently than if it was your best friend who was supposed to show up or call.

Our thoughts about other people's communication and actions are important because they play an important role in determining how we react to the other person, and how we react can increase conflict or decrease conflict. Misunderstandings often occur when we jump to conclusions and make assumptions.

Your perceptions of the other parent's communication and actions will be affected if:

- you selectively notice things – "Is that a new ring on her finger?"
- you are in a highly emotional state – "So that's how he spends my child support cheques!"
- you interpret new behaviour based on past events – "It's Friday so I guess she's late because she's at the bar with her coworkers."
- you make assumptions about the other person's beliefs or intentions – "He cares more about himself than the kids."

When interpreting a situation or the other parent's behaviour:

- remember that your interpretation may not reflect the other parent's meaning or intention
- check to see if what you perceive is really accurate
- take care of your physical and emotional needs
- don't respond right away, especially if you are feeling very angry or sad
- get more information and check whether your interpretations are accurate – ask questions!
- since you might be wrong about how you understood something, be open to changing your views once you have all of the information.

Paraphrasing & Summarizing

Other skills for good active listening are paraphrasing and summarizing. They are very similar ideas, and both are ways to show the other person that you are listening carefully and trying to understand what he or

she is saying. Remember, using these skills does not have to mean that you are agreeing with the other person – they are just ways of confirming that you are hearing the message he or she is trying to get across.

Paraphrasing means repeating what the other person has said, using your own words. For example:

- “It sounds like...”
- “If I understand you correctly...”
- “Let me see if I understand what you’re saying...”

Paraphrasing is also called ‘restating.’ You are confirming that you have understood what the other person is saying by restating what they’ve said in your own words. Restating the message lets the other person know that you are thinking about what they have said and are making an effort to understand, even if you do not agree. Repeating out loud what you think you have heard the other person say also gives him or her an opportunity to correct you if you have missed or misunderstood something.

For example:

Maria: “I just don’t know what to do. I’m pulling my hair out trying to deal with how mad the children are that we’ve separated. I’m crying all the time. This is so frustrating!”

Franco: “It sounds as though you are sad about the children being upset and that we need to figure out how to solve this problem.”

When you’re using paraphrasing, be careful of the following:

- avoid parroting – don’t just repeat back word-for-word what the other person says
- watch your tone – express curiosity, but don’t be judgmental
- don’t follow a paraphrase with ‘but...’ – try to follow a paraphrase with an open question about the problem rather than expressing disagreement
- don’t get defensive – you should expect to hear something you’re not going to like or agree with
- don’t paraphrase continuously – too many paraphrases can stall a conversation, use lots of open questions in between

Summarizing means picking out the key points of what the other person is saying, and repeating them back. This can be very helpful when the other person is talking about a lot of things at once or is talking about something that is complicated. For example:

- “What I understand so far is...”
- “What’s most important to you is...”
- “Let me summarize what you’re saying, and see if I’ve got it right. You’re saying that...”

For example:

Nathaniel: “After the last couple of visits with you, Joey has come home without any homework done. Last time, we had to stay up until 2 in the morning to finish a project due the next day. I think maybe he’s purposely not telling you that he has homework. We need to make sure his work gets done consistently.”

Keisha: "If I understand you correctly, we need a system in place so that I know what homework he has on his weekends with me. That way I can make sure his homework gets done, and I can help him with it."

'I' Statements

When we want to express our needs to the other parent, the message can often come out as criticism or blame in the form of a 'you' statement. This can create a negative environment and result in less cooperation.

Some examples of 'you' statements are:

- "You're such a slob, sending her to school in dirty clothes."
- "You make me so mad when you say mean things to me in front of other people. You're infuriating!"
- "You are so careless! How could you have left his lacrosse gear at your place?"

'I' statements are different because they describe how you feel or what you think in reaction to what the other parent said or did. They talk about your experience without blaming the other parent. This can help the other parent understand your feelings and what you would like them to do differently.

This approach is more respectful than putting the person down, or making it sound like you always know better. It is harder to argue with an 'I' statement because they're about you and aren't criticizing the other parent.

When you are making an 'I' statement, you should be:

- telling the other parent how you feel
- explaining why you feel that way
- describing what you would like

'I' statements are more likely to be heard by the other parent than 'you' statements, and model good communication skills for your children.

Let's take the 'you' statements from before, and turn them into 'I' statements:

- "I am embarrassed when she shows up for school wearing dirty clothes. It makes me worry that people will think we're not taking care of her. I'd appreciate it if she had clean clothes to wear in the morning."
- "I feel really upset when I am put down in front of other people. It makes me feel that you don't think I'm a good parent. I would like it if instead of talking about our problems in front of other people, we could discuss them together when other people aren't around."
- "I would really appreciate it if we could make sure to remember his gear. I will try to remember to send you an email when he has a practice."

When you use an 'I' statement you:

- clarify what you are asking for

- don't try to excuse or justify your needs, thoughts, or feelings
- keep the attention focused on explaining your needs, thoughts, and feelings, rather than blaming the other person
- ask specifically for what you want rather than using generalizations — for example, "I'd like you to try harder to get her there on time" is not very specific, but asking "I'd like for you to get her to ballet 5 minutes before class starts so that she can get organized for class" sets a clear goal.

Remember:

"I feel _____ when _____ and
what I'd like is _____."

Other communication skills

- Ask for Input

Invite discussion about how to solve a problem to make it clear that both of you need to work on fixing it.

For example: "Tom didn't make the football team and he's really upset. Do you have any ideas of how we can help him through this right now?"

- Be aware of your body language and tone of voice

Studies have shown that around 90% of communication is not in the words we use – it's in how we say those words and what we are doing when we say them. Body language and tone of voice tell the other parent a lot about what you're actually saying or feeling. Make sure your body language and your words say the same thing.

For example, you may say you're trying to have an open, honest conversation with the other person, but if you're frowning, using a louder tone of voice and have your arms crossed over your chest, this indicates that you don't really want to have an open, honest conversation.

- Focus on your child's welfare

Avoid discussing what is fair or convenient for *you*. Focus on the needs of your child. Let your conversation be prompted by the question "What choice will serve the overall best interests of our child?"

For example: "I know that this is your weekend with Matthew, but my brother and his kids are in town this weekend. I know he'd love to see them."

- Aim at solving the problem

Adopt a solution-oriented approach to a problem. This will help you come across as being interested in finding a solution, rather than criticizing the other parent. Try to:

- be clear and specific about the problem
- deal with only one problem at a time

- let the other parent completely present their view on the topic
- brainstorm solutions
- choose solutions that best meet the needs of the child

For example: “Nathalie is falling seriously behind in math, and I’m worried that she’ll have to repeat it in summer school. What do you think we can do to help her?”

- Separate multiple issues

Stick to one subject, stay in the present and avoid blaming or making sweeping generalizations, like ‘you always...’ or ‘you never...’ Focus on child-related issues and not old disagreements. Avoid blaming yourself or the other parent for what happened in the past. You can’t change what happened before, all you can change is how you handle problems from now on.

For example: “I know we need to talk about Sam’s braces, how he’s not paying attention in class and what time we’ll exchange him now that your team’s practices are on Tuesdays. These are all important, but let’s talk about them one at a time.”

- Model good communication skills

Set the tone for how you and the other parent communicate.

- Be polite and respectful, even if you feel the courtesy is undeserved.
 - Look for opportunities to express appreciation to the other parent and acknowledge the good things he or she has said or done.
 - Ignore negative comments, especially ones that aren’t relevant, and focus on being positive and problem solving, and on the best interests of your children.
 - Remain calm and don’t react. Remember to avoid making assumptions about what the other parent means or does.
 - Avoid fueling the other parent’s anger, and if you know that the other parent is sensitive about certain things, don’t push their buttons.
 - Apologize when an apology is appropriate, and take responsibility for your part in things that go wrong.
- Practice, practice, practice!

Practising good communication skills can help. It may feel strange at first to only talk about issues affecting the children or to use techniques like active listening and ‘we’ statements, but in time it will feel more natural to you.

Good communication skills are not just useful when you talk to the other parent. They can be very helpful at work and at any time you are in a situation of conflict, need to discuss a difficult issue, or need to negotiate a solution to a problem. And remember, this Program is for everyone who provides parenting to a child or children – moms, dads, grandparents, other relatives, and family friends. These skills may be useful when communicating with anyone.

Anger

It's okay to feel angry, but it's never okay to hurt someone when you are angry. It's also not okay to lash out and say hateful things. Making hurtful comments shows that you are not willing to cooperate, to compromise on issues, or to communicate about difficult problems. This creates conflict that can be seriously harmful to children and damage their emotional and social development, and their future relationships.

When you get mad, try the following steps:

1. Notice your body's response to anger.

Remember how your body reacts to anger. You will feel warmer, your heart will beat faster, there will be a change in your breathing and your muscles will tense up.

2. Before you act on your anger, take a time out.

When you realize that you are feeling angry, stop and take some time to manage your feelings. Try to de-escalate the anger cycle. This may mean taking a break and doing something else like going for a walk, listening to your favourite music, or putting in the garden.

3. Use positive self-talk.

Tell yourself that the other parent has their own reasons for doing what they are doing and those reasons may have nothing to do with you. Remind yourself that the other person may not have meant what you think they meant.

4. Figure out why you're angry.

It can be helpful to think about what is making you angry. What has triggered your anger? How do you feel about what made you angry? Ask yourself whether you are really feeling hurt, afraid, sad, disappointed, embarrassed or insecure rather than angry. Are these other feelings coming out as anger? Is it possible that you are really angry at yourself, or someone else altogether, and that you're taking it out on the other parent?

Remember that anger can be triggered when you are under a lot of stress or experiencing a strong emotion. Ask yourself whether being tired or stressed is triggering your anger, making your reactions worse or influencing how you have interpreted the other person's words or actions. Is something else, like hunger, loneliness or being tired making you angry?

5. Express your feelings with words, in a respectful way, whatever they are.

It can often help to explain how you are feeling. Like active listening, this can help to make sure that both of you have a shared understanding of what is going on so neither of you misinterprets the words or actions of the other person. However, you have to be careful how you express your feelings. Remember:

- describe how you are feeling using 'I' statements
- avoid hurtful words
- don't blame the other person for how you are feeling
- you are responsible for your own feelings
- you are responsible for how you react to your feelings

To learn more about how your anger works, see the 'Understanding Anger' worksheet.

Putting it all together

Here are some ideas for putting these communications tips together when you are having a difficult discussion with the other parent:

- When you realize that you've become angry, take a moment to calm yourself. Take a few slow, deep breaths, or count backwards from 10. Then actively listen to the complaint or criticism.
- Acknowledge the other parent's feelings or concerns, without arguing or disagreeing, by paraphrasing and reflecting on emotions. Ask questions to clarify. Do not defend yourself or counterattack. Avoid using 'you' statements.
- After listening to the other parent and acknowledging the parent's concern, state your point of view. Describe how you see the situation using 'I' statements.
- Use active listening to discuss the issue with the other parent and express your understanding of what the parent has said. This does not have to mean that you agree with the other parent, just that you have heard his or her views on the issue and ensure you each understand the other. Avoid being judgmental or critical. Ask lots of open questions and 'we' statements to explore solutions.
- Keep the discussion focused on the current issue. Don't bring up additional or past problems. If necessary say something like: "This discussion is about Sam's problems in math class. Let's deal with that. We can discuss those issues another time."
- Be aware when you agree with something the other parent has said or when the parent has done something well, and say so. Recognize and acknowledge when the other parent has done something positive.
- Move on from your romantic relationship as partners. Instead, build a new business-like relationship focused on parenting. Establishing boundaries will help.
- Set personal boundaries, and take care of yourself. Explain what you will and will not tolerate in your communication with the other parent. For example, if the other parent is making hurtful comments, you might say "I'm willing to discuss this calmly and respectfully. I will not tolerate you yelling at me. If you can't respect my boundaries, we can continue our conversation later." Your boundaries can be about things like being called names, yelling, invading your personal space or privacy, and bringing up past events.

Remember to remove yourself immediately if the conversation becomes destructive, abusive or violent.

For more tips and information on setting boundaries, see the boundaries worksheet.

Parenting arrangements

Lawyers and judges often use terms like ‘custody’ and ‘access’ to describe parenting arrangements and responsibilities when parents don’t live together. However, when deciding parenting issues, the law requires that the court only consider what is in the best interests of the child.

There can be a lot of confusion surrounding legal terms and it is important to understand the words the court uses. It is often more important, though, to figure out what your parenting arrangements will look like ‘on the ground’ – the day-to-day living and decision-making arrangements for your children.

In this section, we give you a brief overview of some of these terms. For more information, please see the Resources section and the online module ‘What you need to know before starting the family court process.’

Parenting arrangements can be worked out between the parties themselves, with the help of a neutral third party, or by the court in a court order.

When parents reach their own agreement on parenting arrangements through negotiation, they may write down their agreement in a **parenting plan**. A parenting plan is a written document between parents that explains how children will be raised when parents are no longer together. The focus should be on what’s best for the children. In most cases, a parenting plan should have enough detail to be useful, and enough flexibility to be realistic. The more conflict there is between parents, though, the more detail should be included in the plan.

A parenting plan may describe how decisions are made about the children, how information is shared between parents, when each parent will spend time with the children, and how other parenting issues may be addressed. If you develop a parenting plan with the other parent, you can have the plan made part of your court order, if you get a court order put in place.

Custody and joint custody describe how decisions are made that have important or long-lasting effects for the child or that impose responsibilities on a parent - for example, decisions about physical or mental health, including dental care or counseling; education; and enrollment in recreational activities.

Custody means only one parent will make these decisions. Joint custody requires both parties to agree about the decisions to be made.

Primary Care refers to the parent who will be caring for the children for more than 60% of the time.

Shared Custody (or ‘Shared Parenting’ or ‘Shared Care’) refers to an arrangement usually requiring joint decision making and requires that the children are not cared for by one parent more than 60% of the time. For example, Sandy and Dale have one child, Billie. They have a week-on, week-off parenting schedule – Billie lives with Sandy for a week, then with Dale for the next week, and so on. This is a shared custody arrangement.

Split custody refers to an arrangement usually requiring joint decision making and can occur when parents have more than one child together, and each parent has custody of one or more of those children for more

than 60% of the time. For example, Jane and Michael have two children – Tim and Tom. Tim lives with Jane most of the time, and Tom lives with Michael most of the time. This is a split custody arrangement.

Shared and split custody are also defined in the *Federal Child Support Guidelines*, because these parenting arrangements can affect how child support is determined. However, these arrangements don't automatically mean that no child support will be paid.

Access

Access refers to the right of the child to visit or spend time with each parent. This is often referred to as “parenting time” or “visitation.” Sometimes, other people may also have arrangements to have visitation with the children, like grandparents or other relatives.

Different types of access include:

Reasonable access, when parents decide between themselves when visits will occur. This type of access works best when parents get along reasonably well and can communicate with each other.

Specified access, when specific dates and times are outlined for visits. It's possible to have reasonable access and specified access in the same order or parenting plan.

Supervised access, when visits are supervised by another adult. Supervised access is generally ordered in unusual situations when there is some risk to the safety of the child. For example, if there are addiction issues or untreated mental health issues, risk of abduction, or if a parent has been absent for a long time and is being reintroduced to the child.

Visits can take place through ‘**supervised exchange**’ if there are reasons why the parents can't come into contact with one another, but the visit does not need to be supervised. Supervised exchange occurs when a neutral third party is responsible for collecting the child from one parent, and escorting the child to the other parent for the visit. This exchange allows the visit to take place smoothly, but keeps the parents apart.

Refusal by a child to go on a visit

It is not unusual for a child to refuse to go to the other parent's home. Many children find these transitions difficult and may refuse to go, or if they go, may act out for a period of time after the transition.

Unless there are safety concerns within the other parent's home or about the other parent's parenting ability, parents are expected to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the child transitions to the other home. You are expected to deal with this in the same way you would if the child were refusing, for example, to go to school or go to daycare. Some suggestions on making this transition go smoothly are included in the ‘When a child refuses to go for a visit’ handout.

Child support

Child support is money paid by one parent to the other to help with the cost of raising their children. Child support may also be paid to grandparents who have custody of their grandchildren.

The *Child Support Guidelines* are rules for calculating how much child support will be paid, and they include tables that show how much the paying parent will contribute each month. The basic amount paid is called the 'table amount'.

The table amount is based on the paying parent's before-tax yearly income, the province or territory where the paying parent is living, and the number of children for whom support is being paid. The Guidelines also include rules for calculating 'special or extraordinary' expenses, undue hardship and support amounts in cases of split or shared custody.

Child support is usually paid at least until a child reaches the age of majority, which is 19 in Nova Scotia. Child support can extend past that time if the child is still dependent (for example, if they are still in school or cannot support themselves because of a disability).

Contributions toward special or extraordinary expenses may be paid in addition to the table amount. Special expenses can include:

- child care expenses like day-care or babysitting
- the portion of medical and dental insurance premiums paid to provide coverage for a child
- uninsured health-related expenses that total more than \$100 a year (this can include expenses for glasses or contacts, braces, counseling, physiotherapy, speech therapy, prescriptions or hearing aids)
- expenses for post-secondary education (this can include tuition, residence costs, or costs for books and supplies)
- extraordinary expenses for primary or secondary school, or any education programs that meet the child's particular needs
- extraordinary expenses for extracurricular activities

Worksheet: What Would Life Be Like Without This Conflict?

1. What do you want most for your children; what goals and dreams do you have for them?
2. How are your children being affected by the conflict?
3. List what positive outcomes might happen for *your children* if there was less conflict in your relationship with the other parent:
4. List what positive outcomes might happen for *you* if there was less conflict:
5. Suppose 3 years from now your child tells a close friend what you did to make the conflict between you and their other parent better. What would you like him or her to say about your behaviour?
6. How would you like your children to remember your separation 5 years from now?

Worksheet: Understanding Anger

Complete these questions on your own to understand how *your* anger works.

1. Describe a situation that you are still angry about.

2. Write down your thoughts about the situation, how mad you are and why you're mad.
 - a. List the ways that your body responds to your anger.

 - b. Take a deep breath as you scan your body and notice them.

3. Think about an alternative interpretation to this situation and write it down.

4. Does this have an effect on your anger?

5. List the things that you often say or do when you are angry.

6. List at least two things you could do when you get angry instead of the things you usually do or say when you're angry.

Setting Boundaries

Trying to change the other parent's behaviour can often become a source of conflict. It is important to understand that if a situation will only be improved by changing the other parent's behaviour, you do not have control of the situation. You can ask the other parent to change, but if they will not change, there is nothing you can do but 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. This can cause a lot of frustration, and sometimes anger.

Boundaries are personal decisions about what you will or won't do in a relationship, like about the things you are comfortable with and the things you won't put up with. Boundaries set limits. Boundaries are personal – everyone's limits are different – and boundaries can change depending on the relationship and the other parent's boundaries and expectations. Your boundaries are probably not the same as the other parent's.

Boundaries can help you cope with conflict in several ways:

- boundaries can help you be more thoughtful of how experiences and situations affect you
- boundaries can help you to be ready to deal with difficult situations
- boundaries can help prevent you from second-guessing yourself, by deciding ahead of time what is and isn't acceptable to you.

Personal boundaries are the boundaries that you set for yourself.

Four steps to setting personal boundaries:

1. Identify the problem: What exactly is the issue and what do you think about it? Stay aware of your feelings and decide what behaviour you will not accept.
2. Decide how you will respond: Consider how you have reacted to this type of situation in the past and whether that reaction was helpful or not. Determine if you have contributed to the conflict and make a decision to avoid the behaviour that made things worse. Think about what you can do that will reduce the likelihood of future conflict, and picture how you will do it.
3. Communicate your boundaries: Let the other parent know what your boundaries are and how you will act if your boundaries are not respected. Choose the best way to safely communicate this so that the other parent will hear your message. You can communicate by direct conversation, through email, through another person, through your lawyer, or any other way that you decide is the best, and least confrontational, method of delivering the message.
4. Follow through: Stick with your decision every time a problem situation arises. The first time you do not respond the way you said you would you will lose credibility and the other

parent will have no reason to believe you are serious about your boundaries and his or her behaviour being unacceptable.

Here are some examples of personal boundaries:

ISSUE	Whenever there is an issue, the other parent floods you with calls and text messages. Many times you end up in angry exchanges which go on and on. It is especially hard to deal with when this occurs 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 had time to calmly think things through • I will use strategies to help me cope, like talking to my friends or writing emails and not sending them
Step 2: RESPONDING WHEN THIS BOUNDARY HAS BEEN DISRESPECTED 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 a call if I answer by mistake • I will not read texts from the other parent until the end of the work day • I will return appropriate calls and texts after 6pm
Step 3: COMMUNICATION I'll tell him/her about my boundary by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sending an email at a time when things are calm • sending a polite reminder of my boundary • not taking work time to answer calls or texts. After work I will check and return messages. • letting them know that if there is an emergency during the day, they can please contact _____ to get a hold of me

<p>Step 4: FOLLOW THROUGH</p> <p>What if the other parent...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • calls over and over? • leaves a text that says it is urgent? • agrees and doesn't call work for several weeks, and then calls one day? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ follow through on your responses listed in Step 2
--	---

<p>ISSUE</p>	<p>Conversations often become angry arguments/fights regardless of the topic (drop-off times, what the kids eat, what I spend money on, ...)</p>
<p>Step 1: BOUNDARY DECISION</p> <p>From now on...</p>	<p>I will not continue a conversation if it includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raised voices or yelling • swearing or threats • personal attacks or insults

<p>Step 2: RESPONDING WHEN THIS BOUNDARY HAS BEEN DISRESPECTED</p> <p>What I'll do instead is...</p>	<p>as soon as the boundary is crossed by the other parent or I feel myself getting to the breaking point, I will:</p> <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
<p>Step 3: COMMUNICATION</p> <p>I'll tell him/her about my boundary by...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sending an email at a time when things are calm • calling him/her on the phone at a good time, and explaining that when we end up fighting, it gets us nowhere and I am upset all day • telling them I have decided that if the conversation turns into an argument I will end it and give myself 24 hours before I talk to them again
<p>Step 4: FOLLOW THROUGH</p> <p>What if the other parent...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yells at you? • starts swearing and cursing? • has been working on improving the communication and after many good conversations, one turns into a fight? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow through on your responses listed in Step 2

Worksheet: Setting Personal Boundaries

You can use this worksheet to help you set your own personal boundaries. Remember, a personal boundary is the limit between what you will or won't do, what you are comfortable with, and what you will not put up with.

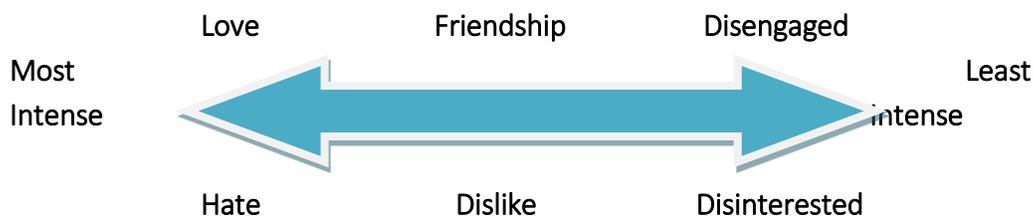
ISSUE	
Step 1: BOUNDARY DECISION From now on....	
Step 2: RESPONDING WHEN THIS BOUNDARY HAS BEEN DISRESPECTED What I'll do instead is....	
Step 3: COMMUNICATION I'll tell him/her about my boundary by....	
Step 4: FOLLOW THROUGH What if....	Answer: Follow through on your response from Step 2 regardless of what the other parent says or does

Disengaging from a past relationship

When parents have been in a relationship together, they usually have a highly emotional reaction to each other, whether those emotions are positive or negative. Love and hate are both signs of intense emotional involvement with someone.

Normally, as time passes, each parent's feelings toward the other will become less intense, and their emotional reactions toward the other parent's words and actions will become less extreme. When a parent is not affected by what the other parent says and does, that parent has emotionally 'disengaged' from the other parent. For some parents, though, conflict is a way of maintaining an emotional relationship with the other parent, even if that relationship is negative or destructive.

This diagram shows the spectrum of emotional closeness we have in our relationships with other people, with love and hate being the most emotionally intense, and disinterest and disengagement being the least intense.



(Adapted from Robert Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships*)

- The opposite of love IS NOT hate
- The opposite of love is INDIFFERENCE
- HATE is an emotional response to a person you should no longer be emotional with

Emotionally disengaged parents find it easier to be cooperative with one another. They don't take disagreements as personally, and are more likely to look at a problem in terms of what is best for their child. They get less upset about the other's private life, or are at least willing to draw a boundary between their private life and the other's private life, and their need to know about it.

An important goal of reducing conflict is becoming less emotionally engaged with the other parent and allowing him or her also to become less engaged. As you each separate emotionally and move towards disinterest or disengagement, you will find that the things the other parent says or does that once hurt or angered you no longer affect you in the same way or to the same extreme.

How do we disengage?

To become more disengaged from one another, parents must redefine their relationship and set clear boundaries with each other. These boundaries don't need to affect the quality of each parent's relationship with their child. They do mean that the parents must move from their old relationship as romantic partners to a business-like relationship focused on their continuing relationship as the parents of their child. Parents can have an emotionally close relationship with their children and a distant emotional relationship with each other.

Ways to do this include:

- **Changing 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 to use positive self-talk (which will be explained in the next section).
- **Reducing the opportunity for conflict by setting clear boundaries:** Less interaction and fewer conflicts give both parents the time and space to deal with the separation and to deal with the end of their relationship.

Avoid assumptions

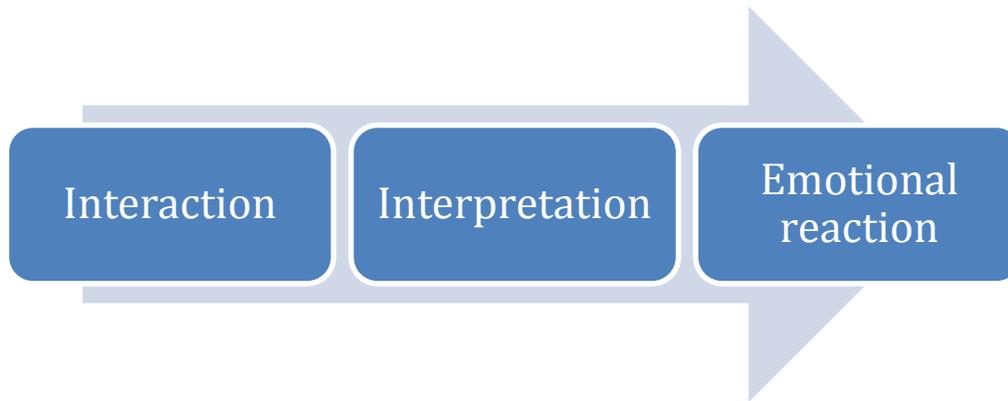
It is easy to assume that the other parent does or says things to get you upset, but there are other ways of understanding what happens between you. **Your emotions are NOT the result of the other parent's behaviour. They are the result of the meaning you attach to the behaviour.**

When the other parent says or does something, you may be too quick to interpret the behaviour as being a problem only because it is coming from the other parent. You react according to the meaning you give the words or behaviour, and that meaning may not be what the other parent intended at all. **You would probably not interpret what is said or done the same way if it was coming from someone else, like a friend, neighbour, or co-worker.**

Here are some common things that trigger negative interpretations:

- sarcasm, or believing that someone is being sarcastic
- backhanded compliments, or believing that someone is not being sincere in complimenting you
- complaints, or believing that someone is being critical of you
- anger, or believing that someone is angry

It's also easy to assume that someone is being negative or attacking you when you are communicating by text, instant messaging or email. When you are communicating this way, you can't see the other person's expression, hear their tone of voice, or see their body language. It can be difficult to figure out the other person's emotional state without these important cues.



In the following examples, notice how we interpret the same words differently depending on the person speaking them and how the different interpretations result in different emotional reactions. How you react can affect your relationship with the person.

What is said	Who says it	You interpret it as	YOUR REACTION
"You're working so late"	your employer	a compliment	happy/proud
	your mother	concern/worry	warmth
	a friend	sympathy	supported
	the other parent	a complaint	annoyed/angry
"You have such nice clothes"	your mother	pride	warmth
	a friend	a compliment	pleased/proud
	the other parent	sarcasm	annoyed/angry

Interpreting what the other parent does or says is often a rapid, knee-jerk response. It is part of a thinking pattern, and people can choose how they will interpret something. The choice of interpretation you make influences your emotional reaction. For example, you can **decide** not to treat a critical comment as a personal attack, but as the expression of a preference. You can **decide** that the other parent's being late to pick up or drop off your child is accidental, not intentional. You can **decide** that your phone call wasn't returned right away because the other parent is busy, not because they're ignoring you.

Talk yourself into another way of looking at the interaction

When you catch yourself reacting badly and 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, things that you can say to yourself. 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'm not going to let this get the best of me.
- I'm not going to let [the other parent] get me upset.
- [The other parent] is not going to ruin this time with my child.
- I'm not going down this path again. I'm staying disengaged.
- We're working as parents now.
- Our child comes first.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Self-talk also includes ways of managing negative thoughts by questioning them. An important step is to recognize how you assign negative meaning to the other parent's words or actions. Here are examples of negative ways of thinking and alternative self-talk statements you could use:

→ **All-or-nothing thinking:** Looking at everything as being entirely positive or entirely negative.

"She's a lousy human being. I can't believe I once thought she was decent!" ("... I once loved her")

Alternatives:

- "Is she really as bad as I make her out to be all the time?"
- "She really is a good parent, and she does such a good job coaching his soccer team."
- "How I feel about her and our separation has nothing to do with how we are raising our child."

→ **Overgeneralizing:** Seeing a small number of events as a regular or permanent pattern, often using the words always and never.

“He is never on time to pick up our child.”

Alternatives:

- “He’s late sometimes now that he’s got this new job and is working more.”
- “He’s late, but it’s only five or ten minutes and it’s not really a problem.”

→ **Dwelling on the negative:** Emphasizing or remembering only bad events, while overlooking or forgetting about good events.

“The house was always messy, he really can’t take care of himself. I don’t see how he can take care of our child.”

Alternatives:

- “He’s messy but he’s a good cook and is really involved in doing homework.”
- “He takes care of our child well enough, and a little bit of mess won’t hurt her.”

→ **Exaggerating:** Blowing a problem out of proportion and imagining extreme but unlikely consequences.

“She is so overprotective that our child is afraid of everything.”

Alternatives:

- “Does she always act overprotective? Isn’t her protectiveness sometimes just what our child needs?”
- “It’s good for our child to be a little cautious about things.”

→ **Jumping to conclusions:** Making decisions without enough information, or assuming you understand the motivations and reasons for the other person’s behaviour.

“He is just dating our neighbour to hurt me, to get back at me for having that affair.”

Alternatives:

- “Maybe he likes her company, and his new relationship is not my business.”
- “What he does is not all about me unless I choose to see it that way. He’s entitled to move on.”

→ **Labeling:** Thinking or referring to the other parent in a negative or generalizing way:

“She is such a whiner.”

Alternatives:

- “She seems to complain a lot, but she can also be really positive and enthusiastic about some things.”
- “Maybe I just have a lower tolerance level for her complaints right now because it’s been a long day and I’m really tired?”

Here are some questions you can ask yourself when you have a negative thought about or reaction to the other parent:

- What makes me view it this way?
- Would I feel the same way if it was another person who did the same thing?
- Am I making assumptions? Could there be another explanation for their behaviour?
- Are my emotions influencing my reaction? Am I just tired and irritable?

You can reduce the conflict for yourself and your children by changing your interpretation of the other parent’s actions. IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU UNLESS YOU CHOOSE TO LET IT BE.

Letting go

Getting over the loss of a relationship can be very difficult. At times it can feel like you’ll never get over the intense feelings of sadness, anger, hurt, guilt or resentment that separation can trigger. Intense emotions like these take a long time to go away, and can cause conflict after separation.

A parent feeling stuck like this will likely need help in working through these intense emotions. However, **the person who is least likely to be helpful is the other parent.** In fact, attempting to help the other parent or get help from the other parent may only fuel the flames of anger and hurt.

If you feel you are stuck, get help from someone outside the family. This could include talking to a counsellor or psychologist, an elder, a religious leader, or a trusted professional.

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 with the other parent
- discouraging conversations about the other parent’s feelings and emotions
- stopping any sexual relations you may be having with the other parent.

When a child refuses to go for a visit

It is not unusual for a child to refuse to go to the other parent's home. Many children find these transitions difficult and may refuse to go, or if they go, may act out for a period of time after the transition.

Unless there are safety concerns with the other parent's home, parents are expected to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the child transitions to the other home. You would often deal with this in the same way you would if the child were refusing, for example, to go to school or go to child care. Some suggestions to make that transition go more smoothly are:

- don't misinterpret the child's refusal to go to the other parent's home as meaning there is something wrong going on at the other parent's home
- don't misinterpret the child's refusal to transition to your home as the child not loving you
- even kids with a great relationship with a parent may sometimes refuse to transition into their care
- don't misinterpret the child's refusal to go to your home to mean that the other parent has been discouraging them from going with you. A refusal to transition into your care does not necessarily mean that the other parent is trying to discourage the child's relationship with you.
- be positive with the child about the time they are going to spend with the other parent
- prepare the child for the transition by giving them age appropriate reminders ("tomorrow you will see your father"; "your mother will be here in ten minutes to pick you up")
- make sure that the child is not engaged in a fun activity (like a video game or TV show) when it is time to transition into the other parent's care
- engage the child in the transition process. For example, have them help pack their overnight bag, or have them call the other parent to let them know you are on your way.
- allow the child to bring their favourite comfort items back and forth with them between houses (like a favourite blanket, stuffed toy, or video game)
- make sure that the transition times are as friendly and comfortable as possible. For example, although it may be a convenient time to discuss issues in relation to the child, if there is any chance the discussion will become uncomfortable or turn into a disagreement, hold off on the discussion for a time when the child is not present.
- make sure that the child has everything they will need for their time with the other parent so that there are no arguments during the transition time (like homework
- or sports equipment)

Children may not want to go with the other parent because they are worried about the parent they are leaving. Sometimes the transition is more difficult and traumatic for the parent than it is for the child. Let the child know that you will be fine without them in your care. Be careful that you aren't giving them any non-verbal cues that you do not want them to go. Kids can understand body language!

Extended Families

When parents separate, children often need their extended families more than ever. The grandparents on both sides of the family and the extended families on both sides can be a resource for the parents and the children. Sometimes, because of strong feelings about a former partner, parents are tempted to exclude the former 'in-laws' from their lives and the lives of their children. Sometimes the extended family abandons a parent and their children.

Existing positive relationships with other family members should be encouraged and continued. Failure to do so can result in another loss for the children. The advantages for keeping these relationships are:

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a measure of how much a child likes the person they see themselves as. We get our sense of self partly from how others, especially those closest, see us. During a separation or divorce, children may question who they are and whether or not they are lovable and valuable. They may blame themselves for the loss. Parents, grandparents and extended family members can reassure children that they are loveable. Some ways of giving children this message are:

- continuing to include them in family events
- encouraging and facilitating communication between the child and their extended family members
- assuring the child that the separation has not changed anything about how extended family members love and value them.

Stability

Parents are separated or divorced, not the children or grandparents or extended family. If the extended family members were important to the children before the separation, they will be important after too. Members of the extended family can provide stability and continuity in the children's lives. For example, if the family always gathered at Grandma's house for Sunday dinners, the children still can at times (even without one of the parents).

Cultural identity

Extended family members, especially grandparents, can assist in passing on cultural teachings and traditions, including language. For example, grandparents can share stories, skills and teachings during their time with the grandchildren. This is also connected to the children's healthy self-esteem.

Sense of belonging

After separation, children will wonder where they belong. They will need assurance that they still belong in both families, whatever the cause of the separation and even if one of the parents is not currently in the picture.

Parents

You can help the extended family and grandparents by:

- Respecting the grandparents' and extended family members' roles and making it as easy as possible for them to stay involved.

- Asking for help without strings attached.
- Letting them know what you need and what the children need.
- Listening to them without judgment or blame.
- Respecting their grieving process. This means allowing them to be angry, sad, in denial—wherever they're at, without pushing them to be 'over it.'
- Not asking them to take sides.

Grandparents and extended family members

You can help the parents by:

- Respecting their role as decision makers regarding their children and not telling them what they should do.
- Offering help without strings attached.
- Asking them what they need and doing what you can to provide what is needed.
- Listening to them without judgment or blame for either parent.
- Respecting their grieving process. This means allowing them to be angry, sad, in denial—wherever they're at, without pushing them to be 'over it.'
- Not taking sides.

New Partner Issues

In some families, a new adult relationship may have started before the separation, or may begin in the early stages of separation or divorce. In others, a new person may not enter the picture for months or years. Whatever the circumstances, dating may trigger negative emotions in children. Children may:

- be fearful of being hurt again
- worry that they may not be loved by the new person
- have concerns about how the new person will fit into their lives
- feel pressured to accept a new partner
- feel abandoned and experience renewed loss when parents spend time with another adult
- feel betrayal, anger, confusion, guilt or mixed emotions
- grieve the loss of the family of origin
- blame the new partner for the break up, whether or not there is any basis for this in reality.

Children need time to adjust to a new partner. Introduce your child to a new partner only when you know the relationship is serious. A general rule is that you should be with your new partner for at least 6 months before they are introduced to your children. Give children time to get to know the person before they are expected to spend extended periods of time together. Children need time to adapt and it takes time to develop closeness, affection, friendship, and trust.

Continue to spend time with your child or children without your new partner present. Finding extra time for your child while seeing a new person can be difficult, but it is important. You must continue to put the needs and best interests of your child first, even as you develop new intimate partner relationships.

Clear and sensitive communication is key to helping children cope with the adjustment of a new partner. It is important to give your child permission to talk about their feelings and be prepared to accept them. Respect that your children may not feel the same way you do about the new partner. Children can very much benefit from a healthy and positive relationship with their parent's new partner. A new partner can be a special friend and a wonderful support for children experiencing separation or divorce. Keep in mind, however, that:

- parents are not replaceable. Children need to know that the new partner will not replace their other parent. New partners should be encouraged to develop their own unique relationship with the children.
- new partners should not compete with parents. New partners should try not to compete with, replace, or be critical of, the other parent. When a new partner criticizes a child's parent, the child feels worse about himself or herself, and less loving toward the new partner.
- generally, new partners should not set the rules and should not discipline. This should remain the responsibility of the parents.

it is necessary to be discreet about intimate behaviour with new partners.

