

Successful Transitions For High Conflict Families

By Cindy Strasheim, Extension Educator

Legal separation or divorce between two parents is difficult for children to understand and accept. It is a confusing time for children as they begin spending time in two different households. Transition is the time leading up to the actual transfer of the children from one parent to the other parent for visitation. Another transition takes place during the return.

The High Conflict Intervention Program in Mesa, Arizona suggests, “It takes approximately 72 hours for some one to calm down after a negative interaction during the first two years” after divorce. “If there is face to face exchange on Friday and on Sunday, then again the middle of the week, the parents never have a chance to calm down.”

When parents engage in conflict, children become more and more fearful. Children tend to become withdrawn and may isolate themselves so they can avoid confrontations. They may become agitated and aggressive. It also takes 72 hours after parental confrontations for children to calm down.

Conflict may be expressed during the transition of children from one home to the other. Some parents prefer to have another family member transfer children to lessen the possibility of confrontation. Some parents exchange children in a public place so confrontation is less likely. However it is done, the apprehension runs high for all of the family members.

Conflict during transition from one parent’s home to another can be minimized using the following:

- ◆ Detach emotions from the situation;
- ◆ Treat the situation like a business transaction;
- ◆ Eliminate shame and guilt;
- ◆ Control comments; and
- ◆ ***Honor the child’s right to a relationship with both parents.***

Research indicates that children who receive ample adult support can overcome even the most traumatic obstacles.

“Because children are permanently scarred by the chronic conflict, the parent who wants the conflict to end, should

focus everything they can, to stop the face to face contact and to reduce the verbal communication between parents. These two efforts alone will reduce the conflict by 75 percent almost immediately.”

Deena L. Stacer, M.A., *Team Works*

What Can A Parent Do?

Observe family attitudes and behaviors during times of transition. Do the children seem to put up a wall and withdraw 24 hours or more before the exchange? Do you feel tense? Can the child sense your tenseness? Do you say things that might be a put down of the other parent? Do you keep reminding your kids to deliver messages? “Tell your dad I said. . . .”. “Your mom can just Tell her I said so.” Do you trap them in the middle?

Once you have observed the attitudes and behaviors that are exhibited during transitions times, focus attention on when children show the first stages of transition anxiety. Reassure your child of your love and commitment without putting the other parent down. Encourage them to enjoy time with the other parent. Give them some quiet time to get ready for the change.

Loyalty is a huge issue for children and the fear that they might have to choose one parent over the other is numbing. Sometimes before transitioning from one home to the other, they need to withdraw to think through what they will do to keep the loyalty and love of both parents without angering either parent. It’s a tough place for a child. Fears of hurting others and being hurt are often coupled with immense anger or sadness just waiting to break free *and hurt someone else*. Remind children that you are there to *listen* and then let them control emotions to their capability. This may include silence for both of you.

The more children are exposed to prolonged conflict between parents, the more likely it is that children will “side with” one parent over the other. Parents should be aware of this as they choose to create or continue conflict in front of children.

Communicate With Respect

As hard as it is to speak civilly about the “other parent” in a confrontational situation, it will pay off. Children model the behaviors they see their parents exhibit. Remember the old saying from Mom, “If you can’t say something nice, then don’t say anything at all.” This is a great time to use this strategy.

Another good strategy is to use “I” messages to express how you feel and how you would like for things to change.

“You seem to be feeling a little (sad, tired, cranky, etc.) after your visit with (Mom or Dad). Why don’t you put your things back in your room and (state a time), we’ll take a break together.”

“I get sad when I come home from being with (Mom or Dad). I wish you were still together. I just need a little time by myself.”

Easing Transitions

- ◆ Post a family calendar with visitation times prominently marked.
- ◆ Help the child ready their travel bag. Include a favorite “cuddly.”
- ◆ Talk about when and where the transition will take place.
- ◆ Encourage children to think about their special things at the other home.
- ◆ Teach them to problem-solve issues they may dislike or fear.
- ◆ Practice relaxation techniques:
 - ❖ Pretend to be Swiss Cheese. Breathe deeply through the holes.
 - ❖ Stretch like a rubberband and then snap back slowly.
 - ❖ Arch your back like a cat and then flatten out.
 - ❖ Think quiet loving thoughts.
- ◆ Give the child time to re-enter home.
- ◆ Let them call the other parent if that helps bring closure to the weekend.

Bottom Line for Parents

Divorce is an adult choice. There will be conflicting feelings for everyone involved. Transition times are difficult because it brings the reality of a “separated” family into clear view for everyone. “Family” is important to children. They want to love both parents.

To lessen the effects of the 72-hour cycle:

- ❖ Avoid as much contact and conflict as you can with the other parent.
- ❖ Ask a “neutral” family member to transfer the children.
- ❖ Meet in the parking lot of a public place if you need to!
- ❖ Be civil to each other for a few brief minutes during the transition.
- ❖ Just Do IT—for your children!

Give children time to transition gracefully. In doing so, the time needed to transition will most likely become shorter and the child’s behavior better knowing they have your support and freedom to transition from one home to the other.

Resources

In the Name of the Child: A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce, by Janet Johnston, PhD, and Vivienne Roseby. New York: The Free Press, 1997.

Caught in the Middle: Protecting the Children of High-conflict Divorce, by Carla Garrity and Mitchell Baris. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1994.

Calming Down the Conflict: The Parallel Parenting Seminar, Colorado Judicial Department, 1999.

High Conflict Intervention Program, Deena L. Stacer and Fred Stemen, La Mesa Calif, 1999.

Team Works, “Working with High Conflict Families”, Deena L. Stacer, Family Services of Omana Seminar, June 2000.

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Index: Family Life Relationships

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