



ALL IN THE FAMILY

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Managing Parental Conflict

BY CHARLES R. HUNSINGER • MARCH 10, 2025

Many people find themselves in contentious relationships with their co-parent. Managing this conflict can be difficult and frustrating. Below are some tips and tricks that may help.

BE HARD ON THE PROBLEM, SOFT ON THE PERSON.

When a conflict arises, focus on the underlying problem, not your co-parent's character. It may well be that the problem is your co-parent's behavior, but there is a big difference between stating, "when you behave this way, it makes it harder to co-parent with you for the following reasons, how are we going to fix that?" and stating, "you're a bad person and I hate when you do that."

FIND A WAY TO BE ON THE SAME TEAM.

If there is an ongoing source of conflict, rather than blaming the other person or making them the opponent, figure out how to frame the issue to put yourselves on the same side working towards a solution. For example, if the co-parent always drops the children off late for parenting time on a certain day of the week, rather than saying, "why are you always late, you were always like this during the marriage, you don't respect me," ask questions. "How could we change the schedule to make it work better for us? What can we do to make the exchange easier?" In this particular context, a "why" question might not give you the information you really need, which is how to prevent a problem moving forward.

FOR THINGS TO CHANGE, SOMEONE HAS TO GO FIRST.

Say you've been stuck in a pattern of conflict with your child's other parent for years. You ask them to drop off your child for soccer practice on their parenting time, but they frequently do not. You're so frustrated that you end up lashing out and criticizing them which prompts them to start yelling and a cycle of conflict has reignited. How to avoid this? Make the conscious choice not to follow the pattern. When your child misses soccer practice the next time, try something new. Ask your co-parent why they are causing your child to miss soccer practice. Ask them how they think that makes your child feel. Ask them how you can help getting your child to soccer practice. Keep in mind what the goal

is. In this example, the goal is to get the child to soccer and not to punish your co-parent. Try something new, see how that changes the response and whether the response is better. If so, your experiment has been successful.

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.

Ultimately, you cannot control other people. The only person you can control is the one who looks back at you from the mirror. Therefore, when the co-parent shows up late again, are you rolling your eyes and making comments under your breath? Or have you prepared by bringing a book to read while you wait and an extra snack for your child? While you might hope that your co-parent will change their behavior, after two years of them being late to a parenting exchange on a Friday, that hope (or expectation) is no longer reasonable. Short of seeking a court order to change the parenting plan, the only thing you can do about it is figure out how to react in a way that does not ruin your weekend with your child and keep you ruminating on your co-parent's failures for days.

Now, I hear your concerns about this advice. "Why do I always have to be the bigger person?" "So I'm supposed to just tolerate bad behavior?" Well, first, you don't always have to do anything. You can choose how you respond to circumstances and not reacting well one week doesn't mean you have to do the same thing the next week. Maybe you have some things you can tolerate and some things you cannot. Perhaps this week you have bigger fish to fry and a 5pm drop off happening at 5:30pm is not truly the end of the world. Or is there a chance that it's better to talk about this at a different time, without your child present, and you can agree that the Friday exchange is a half an hour later and the return time is a half an hour later?

There may be times that your co-parent's behavior is truly intolerable. There certainly may be times that your best option is to file a complaint for contempt. You should never tolerate [abusive or coercive behavior](#). It is important to have boundaries and to respect yourself and your child's needs. However, I hope that these tips can be helpful in preventing small annoyances from building into major issues and perhaps simply modeling better behavior will improve your co-parent's behavior.

At the end of the day, figuring out how to have a better relationship with your co-parent can help make your and your child's life easier. The last thing I will note, however, is that there may never be any vindication for you. The court is not likely to say, "good job being the bigger person, your co-parent really is the problem." Nor is your co-parent likely to give you credit. However, this does not mean that you are not managing conflict better. Ultimately, all the validation you need will have to come from you, whether from your improved relationship with your co-parent, the reduction of stress in your life, or from your child no longer dreading having you both in the same room. Good luck!