ALL IN THE FAMILY

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Parallel Parenting in High-Conflict Custody Matters

BY CATHERINE E. SPANU • FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Courts and family law professionals are increasingly recognizing that forced cooperation and "teamwork" where one or both parents are hostile or volatile can fuel family conflict rather than reduce it. Although research has shown that both parents' ongoing involvement in their children's lives results in the best outcomes for children's emotional and psychological well-being, it is not always possible for parents to cooperate in their children's best interests in a typical co-parenting relationship. Families often turn to parallel parenting, a structured parenting model designed for high-conflict situations. The goal of parallel parenting is not collaboration, but predictability and reduced conflict through minimal or limited communications between the parents. In addition, parallel parenting often features defined decision-making authority, a clear and detailed parenting schedule, and strategic use of intermediaries such as a parenting coordinator or coach.

WHAT IS PARALLEL PARENTING?

Traditionally, family law practitioners and courts have emphasized "coparenting," meaning collaboration and teamwork between parents raising their children in separate households following a divorce or other termination of a relationship. The "coparenting" style of parenting often requires frequent communication and cooperation between the parents, which can be difficult if the parents have a contentious relationship. In fact, collaborating and teamwork with a "coparent" may be close to impossible where there is a significant degree of conflict or poor communication between parents, where one parent feels that the other is controlling or intrusive, or where one parent is emotionally triggered by interactions with the other.

Parallel parenting is an alternative model that allows parents to continue to actively parent their children and ensure the children's needs are met while decreasing direct contact and conflict between the parents. Typically, both parents follow an agreed-upon set of guidelines and agree to important decisions relating to their children's welfare, including medical, educational and religious decisions, but without significant or frequent interaction.

The goal of parallel parenting is to reduce family stress and conflict, which in turn promotes a healthy environment for children. It requires significant thought and planning in order to be effective, including establishing clear guidelines for

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each parent's role, communications, processes for decision-making, and boundaries.

HOW TO PARALLEL PARENT

In order to parallel parent, parents must agree to a parallel parenting approach and establish clear guidelines and protocols. This requires:

Minimizing Direct Communications: Generally, parallel parenting requires the parents to communicate only when necessary, and typically in writing. Communication should be via email or text message, or through a co-parenting app such as Our Family Wizard, AppClose, or similar. A co-parenting app is ideal because it creates a record of communications that cannot be altered or deleted. Some parents use a communication book to communicate, which travels back and forth between their households with the child. Telephone or in-person communication should be used only in rare circumstances, such as a medical emergency involving a child.

Establishing Clear Boundaries and Expectations: Each parent's responsibilities should be clearly laid out in a signed agreement. This should include a parenting schedule with specific start and end times to each parent's parenting time, a detailed holiday and vacation parenting schedule, where pick-ups and drop-offs of the children will occur, who is responsible for transporting the children at the start or end of parenting time if the transition does not occur at school or daycare, communication protocols, and other guidelines as to how the parents will interact, especially when the children are present. It may also include protocols in the event of cancelled parenting time or make-up times, protocols addressing parents' attendance at the child's appointments and activities, such as medical appointments, parent-teacher conferences, and extracurricular activities, including significant events such as games and recitals. Detailed language, ideally crafted with the help of an attorney or other family law professional, will help minimize miscommunication, confusion, and conflict.

Developing Independent Household Routines: Parallel parenting does not require parents to discuss and agree to routines in their respective households. Rather, each parent should establish a routine in their household, which may be different from the other parent's routine. Each routine should remain consistent at each party's household, including mealtimes, bedtimes, or activities, so that a child knows the routine and what to expect at each parent's household. Having a consistent routine helps reduce children's anxiety and helps them adjust, but it is not necessary for those routines to be the same at both households. It may help to have some discussions around these topics while establishing parallel parenting guidelines and to set general expectations, however, since vastly differing schedules between households can be difficult for a child.

Focusing on the Child's Best Interests: The most important factor in parallel parenting is that both parents must put the child's best interests as the first priority in all decision-making. Both parents must focus on the child's emotional needs and well-being first and foremost, which will then help them develop a sense of mutual respect and responsibility for the other parent, even if the parents do not communicate directly. This includes not involving the children in adult matters or using them as messengers. Where parents are in conflict with one another or have been in the past, it is even more vital for children not to be burdened with their parents' conflict. Involving children in such conflict threatens their emotional health and can affect their relationships with one or both parents, which can have long-term, detrimental effects on their social and emotional well-being.

Conflict Resolution Methods: Parallel parenting usually requires a protocol for resolving any child-related conflicts or disputes. Many parents are able to resolve such disputes through a parenting coach or coordinator, who is authorized to address minor adjustments or clarifications to the parenting plan, exchanges of the children, educational decisions, enrollment in activities, travel and passport arrangements, contact with significant others and family, personal possessions of the child, mental health care, religious observances and education, and other child-related, non-financial matters. Parents can agree for a parenting coordinator to have binding authority, often subject to review by

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the Court if either parent disagrees with the parenting coordinator's resolution of a particular dispute. Other options for resolving conflict in child-related matters include addressing conflicts as they arise by utilizing an agreed-upon family therapist, mediator, or conciliator.

Parallel parenting can be a highly effective alternative to co-parenting arrangements that involve significant interaction, collaboration, and working cooperatively. With careful thought and planning, parallel parenting can reduce conflict in high-conflict situations, reduce children's emotional distress and anxiety caused by such conflict, and minimize parents' emotional distress and anxiety as well. But it's also important to approach parallel parenting with caution as courts typically expect parents to function as co-parents and view co-parenting as better for children. Some judges may find that parallel parenting is not in the best interests of the children depending on the specific circumstances and thus award sole legal custody to one parent, cutting the other parent out of decision-making for their children. Consult an experienced family law attorney or other professional to discuss whether parallel parenting could be an option for your family.

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